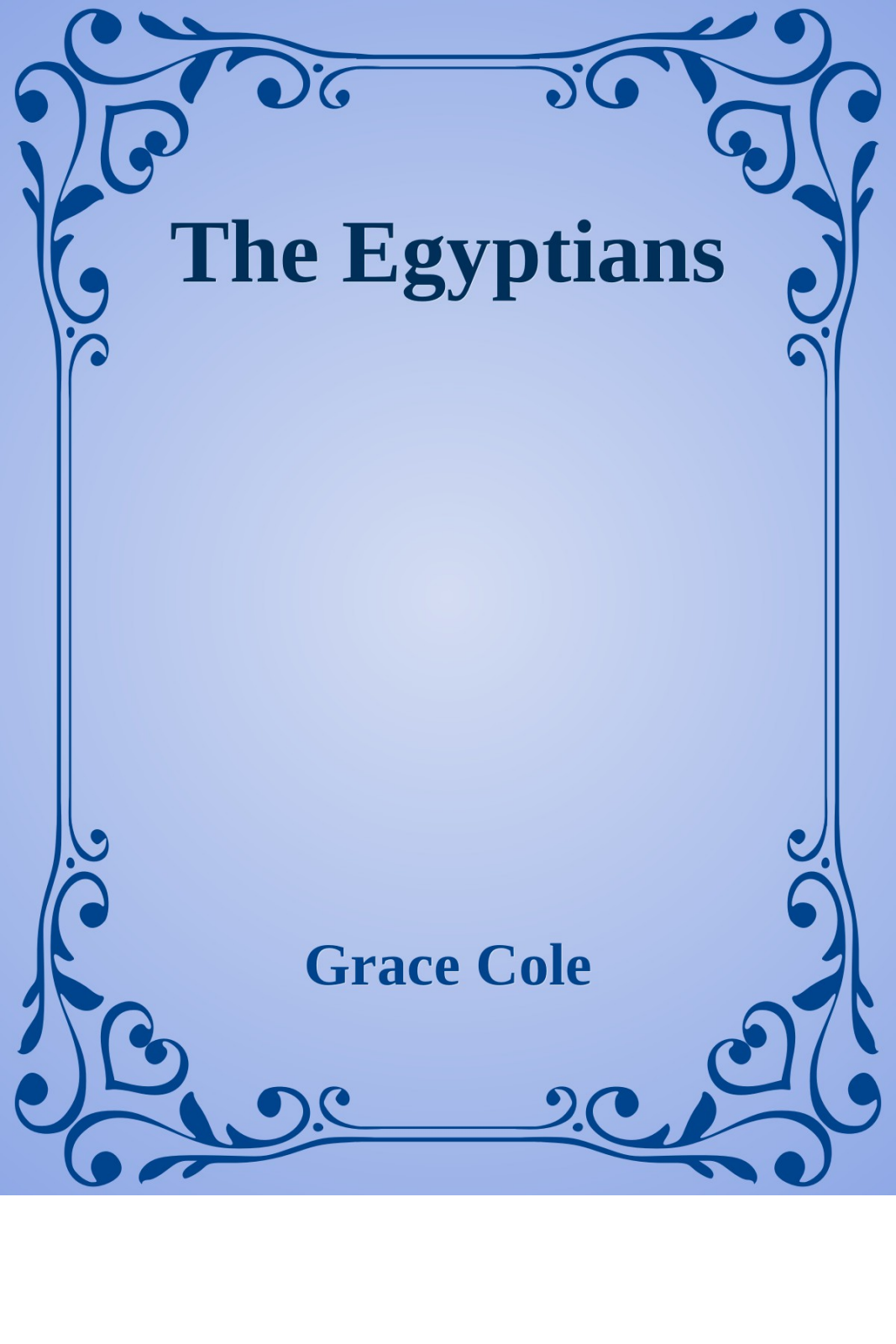


A decorative blue floral border with intricate scrollwork and leaf patterns, framing the entire page. The border is composed of four corner pieces and four side pieces, all featuring symmetrical, swirling designs.

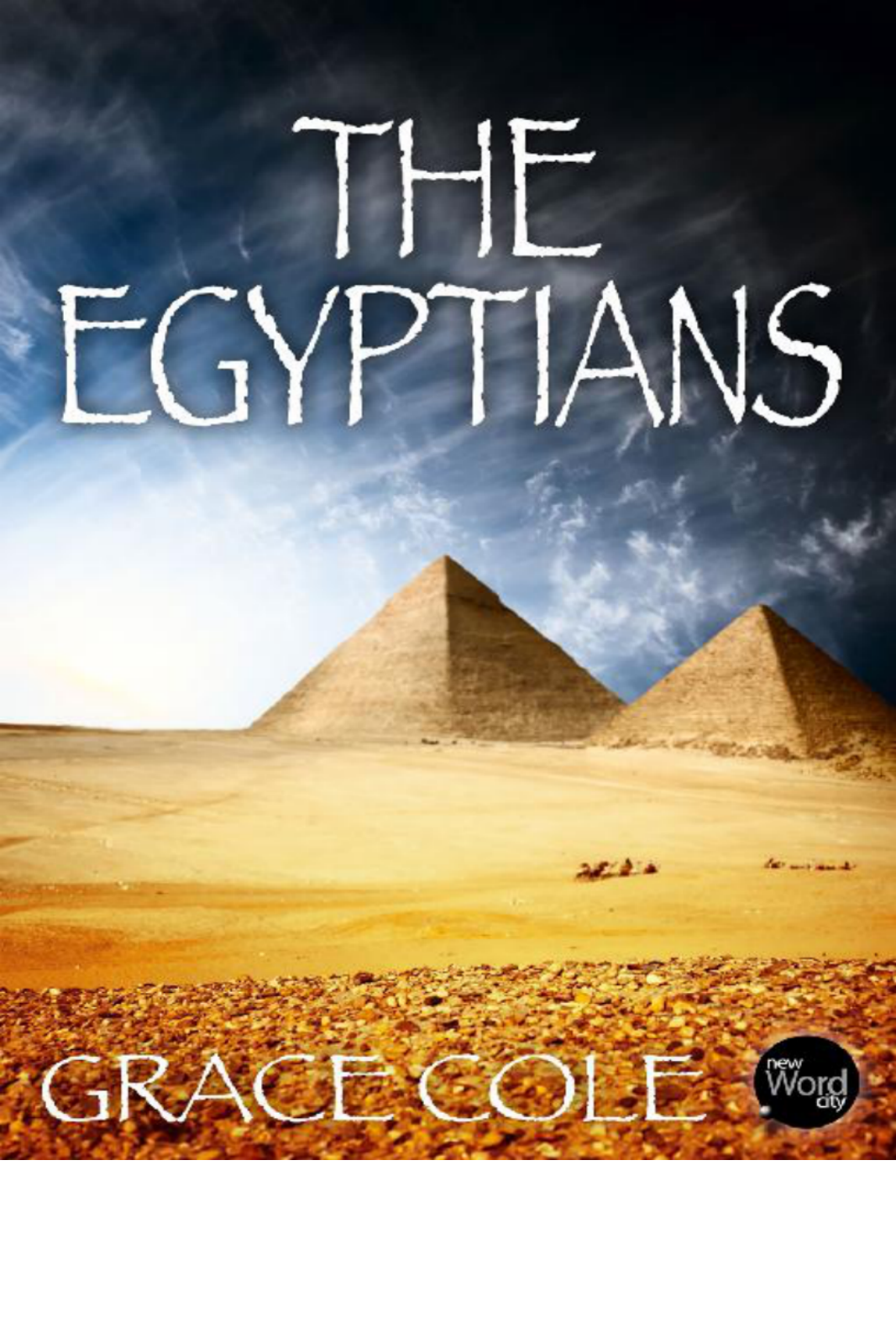
The Egyptians

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THE EGYPTIANS



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1

BURIED HISTORY

The splendor of Egypt's ancient civilization has never been forgotten. The [Minoans](#) of Crete, the Sumerians of Mesopotamia, the creators of the first civilization in India all vanished without a trace, and the world was astonished when archaeologists discovered their existence. But in Egypt the grandeur of the past was simply impossible to ignore: The pharaohs, willing their sculptures and monuments to last forever, built massive structures of enduring stone. As a result – and because of Egypt's desert climate - these works of art and architecture still stand more or less intact, reminding us that Egypt once supported a powerful, long-lasting civilization.

To modern minds, the sheer age and endurance of ancient Egypt is staggering. The first pharaoh mounted his throne more than 5,000 years ago when Europe's last hunter-gatherers were just taking up primitive farming, and pharaonic dynasties ruled Egypt for the next 3,000 years. Egyptian culture triumphed over all adversaries: Even when [Alexander the Great](#) conquered the land in 332 B.C., the generals who followed him adopted Egyptian ways and began a new dynasty of pharaohs that ended only with the unforgettable [Cleopatra](#) and the annexation of Egypt by [Rome](#). While other civilizations rose and fell, the Egyptians tilled their land, built their monuments, worshipped mostly the same set of gods, grew and shrank and restored their empire, and left a permanent mark on the world.

Yet for centuries the secrets of ancient Egypt were unknown, buried in undiscovered tombs and hidden in plain sight. Only in the past 150 years have the civilization's hieroglyphs been translated and centuries of Egyptian history reconstructed by archaeologists and scholars. Thanks to them, great rulers like [Hatshepsut](#) and [Thutmose III](#) have come alive again, and the sweeping dramas, wars, religious upheavals, and foreign invasions of three millennia have been unveiled. Even less prominent rulers, such as the young king [Tutankhamen](#), along with the plotting viziers and generals grasping for the throne, have come to be understood as real people.

Hatshepsut, for instance, was the dowager queen who assumed manly attributes and usurped the pharaoh's throne from her nephew. [Imhotep](#) wasn't a pharaoh, but he may have been the smartest man in history, at least until [Leonardo da Vinci](#) came along. [Akhenaten](#) converted all of

Egypt to the worship of a single god, only to have his successor Tutankhamen reverse the order and return to the old pantheon. Amenemhab, a redoubtable general, stepped between his pharaoh Thutmose III and a charging bull elephant and cut off the beast's trunk with one strike of his bronze sword. And, of course, there was Cleopatra, who seduced both [Julius Caesar](#) and [Marc Antony](#) in the cause of saving Egypt's autonomy and her own rule.

The Egyptians were proud of their ancient heritage. By the time of the [New Kingdom](#), some 1,500 years after the first pharaoh, the pyramids and temples of the [Old](#) and [Middle](#) Kingdoms were regarded as national monuments, and visitors from all parts of the country flocked to see these wonders. But the records of the pharaohs formed no systematic chronicle, and it wasn't until the third century B.C., after Alexander's conquest, that [Manetho](#), a priest at [Heliopolis](#), wrote the first history of Egypt. His text survives only in references and extensive quotations by later writers, and some of what he wrote is full of inaccuracies. Even so, Manetho remains our first source. Beyond his words everything must be painstakingly resurrected from hieroglyphic proclamations and boasts, ancient clay harvest records, sculptures, potsherds, and tomb paintings – and increasingly from such modern tools as CT scans and DNA analysis.

The message of all these keys to the past is that Egypt was unique among ancient civilizations, supremely blessed by nature to flourish and endure. And this blessing starts with the mighty river that runs the length of the land from south to north, making Egypt an extended oasis in the North African desert. Writing in the fifth century B.C., the [Greek](#) historian [Herodotus](#) was the first to note that the country of Egypt "is the gift of the [Nile](#)."

The annual flooding of the river renewed and expanded Egypt's fields with fertile silt from the heart of Africa, providing harvests to feed a growing population. While early civilizations along the [Euphrates](#) and [Indus](#) and [Tigris](#) river valleys had to fight invaders on open plains, the desert on both sides of the Nile helped shield Egypt from attack. The annual floods spurred political and social organization, eventually leading to a unified central government, as well as writing and mathematics for annual surveys to reestablish

land claims. The Nile provided easy transportation and communication and encouraged the development of ships and navigation. And the three months of flooding each year was a window during which the pharaohs could organize vast swarms of workers to build their massive monuments on higher ground.

Egypt was a beacon for other emerging cultures. Greek and Roman travelers were awed by what they saw in Egypt. Beginning his account of his visit there, Herodotus wrote, "Now I shall speak at some length about Egypt because it offers many wonderful things and contains works which are more remarkable than those of any other land"

But like the delicate hieroglyphics carved into pyramids and temples as records of their history, the era of pharaohs faded. By 394 A.D., Christianity was spreading from [Alexandria](#), and churches were replacing Egyptian pagan temples. Some 300 years later, [Arab](#) conquerors seized control of the Nile valley.

Unlocking the Past

The [Renaissance](#) in Europe – spanning roughly the fourteenth through seventeenth centuries - bridged a gap between the past and the Modern Era, and Egypt's relics and ruins captured the public imagination like never before. Tourists ventured to Egypt to behold the pyramids and the enormous temples and monuments lining the Nile, but they knew nothing about the gods and pharaohs carved on the walls and wrongly believed these images to be religious symbols rather than a written language.

Credit for cracking the hieroglyphic code belongs, in some measure, to [Napoleon Bonaparte](#). In 1798, he invaded Egypt. With him were 175 artists and scholars charged with exploring and recording the painted scenes and the hieroglyphs on the ancient monuments. Although his military expedition was a failure, his cultural venture was a success. When they returned to France, Napoleon's scholars published their findings. Their illustrations filled thirty-six volumes and were an immediate sensation. Egyptian influence can be seen in the decorative style of the [French Empire](#) period, with its ornate columns and palm-frond accents.

But the key discovery wasn't immediately apparent. [Pierre-](#)

[Francois Bouchard](#), an officer supervising trench digging for Napoleon in the Egyptian delta near Rosetta, uncovered a dark, carved, stone marker, or a stela. It was smooth on one side and inscribed with three columns of text on the other, the first in hieroglyphs, the second in Egyptian [Demotic](#), the third in more-familiar Greek, easily discernable by the archaeologists who later studied it. Carved about 196 B.C., it was a decree honoring [Ptolemy V](#). Scholars reasoned the other two columns repeated the decree, and this discovery became a key to understanding hieroglyphs. Napoleon ordered an engraving made from the inscriptions on the stone and sent copies to be studied by scholars across Europe. In 1801, the [Rosetta Stone](#), as it was called, became a trophy of war between England and France; it is now is on display in the British Museum in London.

The Rosetta Stone is among the most famous of all Egyptian antiquities, but it would take another two decades to decipher all of its inscriptions. The Greek portion was easily completed by 1803, but the breakthrough came in 1819 when Englishman [Thomas Young](#) learned from studying the stone how to spell out the name of Cleopatra from another inscription. This convinced many scholars that hieroglyphs did, indeed, represent letters. Among those who agreed with Young's conclusions was a French linguist named [Jean Francois Champollion](#).

Champollion's familiarity with the primitive Egyptian language of Demotic set him apart from other linguists of his time. Results of his initial studies of hieroglyphs were published in 1822; over the next decade, he wrote an Egyptian dictionary. Messages from an ancient civilization, waiting more than 1,000 years to be deciphered, finally unlocked the mystery and rich history of the ancient Egyptians.



2

TAMING THE WILD NILE

Egypt sits at the eastern edge of the [Sahara Desert](#), and its southern region, known as [Upper Egypt](#), is one of the driest places on earth. [Lower Egypt](#), closer to the Mediterranean, is only slightly less so. Egypt is a land of sand and stone; only a small fraction of the country is suitable for agriculture, mostly along the banks of the Nile.

All nations spring from their geography – think what the sea is to Britain and the Alps are to Switzerland - but few more so than Egypt, the product of the Nile. The most ancient of the ancient Egyptians believed the river gushed from an underground spring near the island of Elephantine, not far from Aswan. Actually, it comprises two main tributaries: the [White Nile](#) and the [Blue Nile](#). [Lake Victoria](#) in Tanzania is the headwaters of the White Nile, but because Lake Victoria is fed by a number of substantial streams and rivers, the ultimate source of the Nile is not agreed upon even today. The shorter Blue Nile, which provides most of the water and alluvial silt for which the Nile is famous, rises from [Lake Tana](#) in Ethiopia. The two rivers join at Khartoum, the capital of modern Sudan. On its way to its sprawling delta on the Mediterranean Sea, the Nile is swelled by the waters of the [Atbara River](#) and interrupted by six cataracts, which ranged from rapids to waterfalls. Egypt has long been considered the region between the Mediterranean and the First Cataract at Aswan, 800 miles to the south, though Pharaoh Thutmose III stretched it as far as the Fourth Cataract, which has now been submerged by Sudan's [Merowe Dam](#).

In early July each year, the Blue Nile, powered by spring rainfall and the winter melt, rages downstream, scouring rocks and boulders from its bed and pouring millions of gallons of water into the calmer White Nile. Overflowing its banks, the river deposits the silt that enriches the land. Egyptians call their fertile fields "black land," as opposed to the "red land" of the desert.

"When the Nile inundates the land," Herodotus wrote, "all of Egypt becomes a sea, and only small towns remain above water, looking rather like the islands of the Aegean. At such times shipping no longer follows the stream, but goes straight across the country. Anyone . . . traveling from Naucratis to Memphis sails right alongside the pyramids."

Of course, land and climates change over time. The Nile, over

the course of its 5-million-year existence, has run wider and slower, deeper and faster, and sometimes almost not at all. Two great changes simultaneously affected the Nile some 8,000 years ago: The desert settled into the extreme aridity that persists to this day, and the Nile began to deposit vast amounts of alluvial silt along its floodplain in a regular, late-summer flooding called [The Inundation](#).

About 12,000 years ago, the end of the most recent [Ice Age](#) produced extreme variations in the flow of the Nile, which Egyptologists sometimes refer to as the Wild Nile. The melting of great glaciers blanketing much of northern Europe and Asia, and the shift of moisture-laden Atlantic winds to the north, gradually dissipated the rain that had once fallen, creating a desert climate in land along the Nile and in the area known as the Sahara. Buffalo, elephants, giraffes, and rhinoceros, along with other game, moved out of Egypt. The primitive [Paleolithic](#) hunters who roamed a wider area did not yet know how to raise crops, and as hunting opportunities across much of Egypt dwindled, many of them migrated to follow the game. Those who remained concentrated in the Nile valley.

In the desert on either side of the Nile, people began domesticating goats, and within 500 years, crops - wheat, barley, lentils, and tubers - were being cultivated. The people's knowledge of agriculture may have stemmed from Western Africa or the Middle East, but evidence suggests that agriculture was invented independently at different times by different people on every inhabited continent, and the people of the Nile valley may well have done the same.

Some 7,000 years ago, farmers established settlements in Lower Egypt around the [Faiyum Oasis](#), a few miles west of the Nile and south of what is now Cairo. They grew barley and wheat, as well as flax, from which they made linen for clothing. The Faiyum people relied on hunting as well, and there is evidence that they fished and ate goats, pigs, and sheep. Their settlements created a permanent record in their trash dumps and graveyards, brimming with pottery and tools for future archeologists to discover.

There was little communication between Lower and Upper Egypt in the pre-dynastic period prior to the rise of the pharaohs, and the emergence of distinct cultures in Upper

Egypt came several centuries after they had appeared in the north. A little over 6,000 years ago, an Upper Egyptian group called the **Badarians** were prominent. No one knows where they came from.

The Badarians raised crops of barley and wheat for bread and tended to livestock. They crafted hard-wearing tools and pots, and the men, predominantly, made their linen clothes. When the Badarians buried their dead, they left food and various objects in the graves, which they believed the departed would need in the afterlife.

Between 4000 and 3000 B.C., the floor of the Nile valley between the Western and Eastern deserts was marshland, inhabited by hippos, crocodiles, hippopotamuses, and waterfowl. To the north, the **delta** – the largest in the world – was well drained and fertile, bordered by lush meadows. Over the centuries, as the delta filled with silt, the water level dropped. As centuries passed and newly arable land emerged, people moved into the lowlands and began to establish farms.

As the Nile settled into a predictable annual routine, tending crops became a less precarious and more reliable means of existence.

Early Egyptians invented systems to irrigate their fields. Advancements in farming techniques meant food grew more plentiful, the population multiplied, and people found time for recreation.

By 3600 B.C., villages had become towns. Early settlements had been comprised of small huts made from reeds, but the preferred building material soon became mud molded into bricks and dried in the sun. The settlers used these bricks in constructing their houses and temples and their chieftains' homes. Regional overlords became increasingly powerful, and in Upper Egypt especially, territorial conflicts began to arise and were recorded in writing for the first time, in hieroglyphs, which the Egyptians probably adapted from Asian influences. In the 500 years that followed, towns developed into cities with large public buildings.

Because the Nile split into smaller branches within its delta near the Mediterranean Sea, Lower Egypt was geographically more fragmented than Upper Egypt. The region was made up

of many isolated villages with no cohesive political organization, and little is known about how it was ruled in pre-dynastic times. By 3200 B.C., however, a number of powerful city-states emerged in Lower Egypt. Meanwhile, the population of Upper Egypt grew and its rulers began to eye the fertile land and active trading centers of the north.

Egypt was about to become Egypt.

A Distant, Mysterious Life

Outside cultures began to influence daily life along the Nile, as Egyptians interacted with their trading partners – from Crete, Cyprus, Lebanon, Palestine, [Rhodes](#), and Syria and from lands along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Sailing ships navigated the coasts, transporting goods, ambassadors, and ideas into and out of Egypt.

Egypt's people began to think and even look like the rest of the world. In the south, the intermixture with natives of African deserts and grasslands was commonplace; in the north connections with people from Libya and western Asia remained strong. Words and phrases of far-reaching origin began to pervade the Egyptian language, as well, blending it into a more worldly tongue.

Skilled craftsmen, the ancient Egyptians carved graceful ivory combs and knife handles, chiseled ornate stone vases, and shaped slate pestles to resemble fish and fowl. The shells of turtles were ground into the pigments that made up the eye paint they favored and later found use on ceremonial or memorial plaques. The distinct style and culture we recognize today had begun to emerge.

The Egyptians appreciated beauty and lived in cities with palaces and temples at their center. Wealthier families had servants, and their homes were filled with elegant furniture – carved beds and chests. They sat on four-legged chairs at four-legged tables. They enjoyed a sophisticated public infrastructure and a strong central government, and paid taxes to support both.

But what most fascinates us about ancient Egypt is the way they recorded their accomplishments - in what they wrote, in the magnificence of what they built, and in the artistry of the

objects they buried with their kings and queens.

As much as we know about ancient Egyptian culture - from its customs and religious beliefs to its tax system and its relations with other countries - we cannot experience a day in the life of an Egyptian in those days. Ancient Egyptians recorded momentous events and celebrated great kings with glorious tombs and ornate memorials, but they were silent on their own lives. They lived under the absolute authority of a pharaoh – a king they believed to be a god. The pharaoh became the people's connection with a world controlled by many gods in which nothing was random or accidental. An ancient Egyptian had a sense of self far different from our own; he or she was but a small part of a continuing story that unfolded according to the judgment of the gods and the pharaoh. In effect, the ancient Egyptians were living a myth of their own creation.

The story of Egypt under the pharaohs is divided into four periods: the Early Dynastic era (from 3100 to 2686 B.C.), the Old Kingdom (from 2686 to 2181 B.C.), the Middle Kingdom (from 2133 to 1786 B.C.), and the New Kingdom (from 1567 to 1085 B.C.) Each of these epochs featured a distinct culture, and each contributed a chapter - measured in centuries - to one of history's greatest civilizations.

At first, Egyptians used the word pharaoh, which means "great house," to refer only to the royal palace; it was not used to signify the Egyptian kings. But during the New Kingdom, pharaoh came to mean king, and today we use it for the entire succession of divine kings in the dynastic era.

Egypt was divided into The Two Lands – upper and lower – that were only periodically brought into alliance by the rule and might of pharaohs and the will of the Nile itself. Upper Egypt extended from the rapids below Aswan - the First Cataract of the Nile and the only one still flowing today – to the ancient city of [Memphis](#), near modern Cairo, where Lower Egypt begins, encompassing the delta region, all the way to the Mediterranean coast.

Lower Egypt was called the Red Land, and its leader wore a crown of red. The bee and the papyrus leaf were potent symbols in the north. To the south in Upper Egypt, the sedge - a flowering grass - was the symbol of power; this region

was called the White Land.

Both regions were organized by small clans into groups of villages known as districts that surrounded a capital town. Each district had a chieftain to lead it in worldly matters and its own unique god, distinguished by a specific insignia, to protect them.

At some point, powerful chieftains of the northern and southern districts split them into separate kingdoms. In the pharaonic period, these clan-based districts emerged as city-states known as nomes, each with a governor chosen by the pharaoh. Each governor lived in a capital that held the temple of the nome's patron god.

A Phalanx of Gods

As Egypt's first historian, Manetho, reconstructed the story, the first pharaoh was [Menes](#), also known as Narmer. Manetho presumably relied on ancient stone texts similar to the [Palermo Stone](#), a fragment of a commemorative monument that now resides in a museum in Sicily. Discovered in the 1860s, the Palermo Stone is inscribed with a sequential list of Egyptian rulers that includes the Old Kingdom and extends back thousands of years into the pre-dynastic period.

Manetho's chronology of ancient Egypt is occasionally contradicted by archeological discoveries and radiocarbon dating that reveal a history the Egyptians tracked in a variety of ways. For example, while the ancient Egyptians understood that a solar year consisted of 365 days, they didn't begin and end their years on the same date. Instead, the Egyptian calendar started again and again, often beginning with the ascension of a new pharaoh: a "regnal" year in which the story of Egypt began anew. This perpetual renewal of the calendar was often confused further by the fact that pharaohs sometimes went by more than one name. At other times, the calendar was restarted with the occasion of another significant event - such as a cattle census.

Religion was always a central force in Egyptian life, to an extent almost unimaginable to later observers. In the fifth century B.C., Herodotus described the people of the Nile as "religious to excess, beyond any other nation in the world." But by the time of his visit, the widespread worship of the

pharaohs had dissipated, and what was left was a tepid simulacrum of the great eras of Egyptian piety.

Among all the deities the Egyptians worshipped, the most prominent were the sun gods. Their names and dispositions changed over the years, but not their connection with the sun. With the head of a falcon – a symbol of the god [Horus](#) - and the tail of a bull, Ra was the ancient Egyptians' first personification of the sun and would be the most lasting. The tombs of the pharaohs were topped with gold to reflect the light of the god as he crossed the sky.

Ra and Horus were two of a host of gods too numerous and complex to count. Egyptian deities were often depicted in human and animal forms, sometimes in combination. Egyptians believed that initially the gods lived among humans, but withdrew from the world to dwell elsewhere, mainly in the sky, but also invisibly on earth. The gods also lived in the temples dedicated to them and could come and go as they pleased.

The Egyptians did not always make the distinction between people and gods - an extraordinary person might be mistaken for a god and vice versa. The dead were also believed to be gods, and the pharaoh was most certainly a god or in league with one. Egyptian deities required specific rituals and offerings performed in temples built for them by their followers. All gods were associated with natural forces or phenomena, but some were greater than others, and Egyptian scholars regard the subset of lesser gods as demons.

The polytheism of ancient Egypt stemmed from many pre-dynastic sources. Isolated settlements and clans worshipped individual gods, and these formed a pantheon with the country's unification after Menes. Each god was inseparable from the act of nature he or she regulated. There were also gods of abstract concepts, such as Sia, the god of perception. Paradoxically, the gods of ancient Egypt controlled everything, but not every event was associated with a god. A temporary phenomenon, such as an eclipse, did not have a corresponding god, nor did something as common as fire. Other important elements of Egyptian life - the Nile, for example - had a number of gods associated with them.

Ancient Egyptians feared chaos and disorder. They believed that the universe was created as the gods struggled to bring the unruly world under control, and their guiding principle was *maat*: rightness, justice, the natural and correct order of all things. The gods not only maintained *maat*, but were subject to its principles and bound to act in accordance with it. Belief in *maat* helps explain the basic conservatism that underpinned the longevity of ancient Egyptian culture.

Dynasties ended when a pharaoh died without a legitimate heir or perhaps when his successor was weak and an outsider managed to take over the throne. But even then – for example, when the Nubian warrior-king Piye launched the twenty-fifth dynasty in 752 B.C. – newcomers tended to be assimilated by Egypt's traditional values. Piye's son Taharqa reunified the two lands of Egypt and sparked a renaissance in art, architecture, and religion, but the glory he restored was essentially Egyptian.

During his lifetime, the pharaoh was thought to be Horus, a sky god shown with the sun disk on his head. He was believed to be the son of Osiris and Isis. Murdered and dismembered by his brother, Set, Osiris was restored to life by the goddess Isis, who then gave birth to Horus. The gods' son sought vengeance and defeated his uncle, but in the fight lost an eye, symbolizing the sacrifices of sons in the names of their fathers. This story fit the Egyptians' image of their pharaoh, whose duty, as they saw it, was to reconcile the forces of good and evil, like Horus with Set.

The Egyptians saw the influence of Osiris, a god of renewed life and resurrection, in the annual flooding of the Nile, the blossoming of crops, and in the resilience of the Egyptian people. Thought to have the power to grant immortality, Osiris also reigned over the dead and was the judge of people's souls.

Ancient Egyptians believed that after his death, the pharaoh had similar powers, and depicted him in the afterlife as Osiris. Horus was then reborn in the pharaoh's son, assuring continuation of his dynasty.

The First Dynasty

A stone plaque inscribed with some of the earliest-known

hieroglyphs tells the story of Menes, also known as Narmer, the founder of the first dynasty. An exceptional soldier and statesman, Menes united the nomes of Upper and Lower Egypt in about 3100 B.C., in part by marrying a princess from the north and wearing a red crown on his wedding day to symbolize his ascendancy in Lower Egypt. On the royal palette, Menes is shown wearing a double crown, featuring both the papyrus reed of Lower Egypt and the sedge of the south. Thus, Egypt was bound together physically by the Nile and spiritually, symbolically, and politically by its first pharaoh. To foster and symbolize the new political unity, Menes erected his capital at Memphis, near the border between Upper and Lower Egypt.

Memphis – also called “White Walls” or “The Fortress of the White Wall” – grew to be a majestic city, and among the most important of the ancient world. A political and economic capital, Memphis was also a thriving center of artistic and religious life. According to Manetho, Menes built an intricate system of levees along the Nile to fortify the city against floods - an infrastructure so durable and well maintained that it was still in place and fully functional when Herodotus visited Memphis nearly 3,000 years later.

Menes, or perhaps a later pharaoh, also built a great temple at Memphis dedicated to the god [Ptah](#). Usually depicted as a bearded man with green skin dressed in a clinging shroud, Ptah was what the Greek philosophers would later call a “demiurge” - literally, a public worker, but in the context of ancient Egypt’s polytheistic belief system, a creator of the universe responsible for maintaining the world. Fittingly, Ptah was known more intimately as the god of craftsmen and artisans, a reputation that would spread his cult throughout Egypt and beyond, as his dedicated followers built shrines and created icons in his name. By the time of the Middle Kingdom, Ptah was regarded as one of Egypt’s five major deities, along with [Amun](#), Isis, Osiris, and Ra. The English word Egypt comes from *Hikuptah*, as Memphis was called in ancient times, meaning “Home of the Soul of Ptah.”

The temple of Ptah at Memphis was a vast, walled complex that could be entered through three towering gates flanked by immense statues. In scale and beauty, it rivaled the temples of Ra at Heliopolis and Amun at [Thebes](#).

Menes's probable son and successor, [Hor-Aha](#), built the first royal palace at Memphis - a white-walled stronghold that gave rise to subsequent palaces, some of which included lakes and parks. These palaces, along with the growing number of temples, were the focal points of the city and were surrounded by shops, arsenals, and residential districts.

What we know about ancient Memphis comes mainly from the records of the dynasties that were based there, supplemented by meager archeological evidence. Some later dynasties reigned from Thebes or other cities; in the later Roman period, Alexandria became Egypt's capital and the hub of northeastern Africa. Then the cult gods of Memphis were forgotten and the city toppled. The temples were dismantled as Memphis became a quarry for the construction of cities to the north, including Cairo. Despite the destruction, the scale of the ruins made a deep impression on Arab historian [Abd-ul-Latif](#) when he visited Memphis in the thirteenth century A.D. He said the city was a "half day's journey" in every direction. "Enormous as are the extent and antiquity of this city," Abd-ul-Latif wrote, "in spite of the frequent change of governments whose yoke it has borne, and the great pains more than one nation has been at to destroy it, to sweep its last trace from the face of the earth, to carry away the stones and materials of which it is constructed, to mutilate the statues which adorned it; in spite, finally, of all that more than 4,000 years have done in addition to man, these ruins still offer to the eye of the beholder a mass of marvels which bewilder the senses and which the most skillful pens must fail to describe. The more deeply we contemplate this city the more our admiration rises, and every fresh glance at the ruins is a fresh source of delight."

Menes and his successors in the first two dynasties established the political order and social structures that would dominate Egypt for centuries. It was a culture built on rigid hierarchy that has been likened, appropriately, to a pyramid. At the apex was the pharaoh, the head of a centralized theocracy who was both man and divine being. While the pharaoh's power was absolute, he also had to respect the order and justice inherent in *maat*, so the king was constrained by tradition as well as the apportioned powers and responsibilities of the citizens under his rule. Beneath the king were nobles and high officials, then lesser officials, members of the royal court, then artisans and craftsmen.

Farmers, laborers, and other peasants made up the broad base of the pyramid.

Egyptian society was managed by a sprawling bureaucracy whose most important function was to collect taxes, mainly in the form of grain that could be traded abroad. Craftsmen - potters, metalworkers, and carpenters - produced a variety of luxury goods coveted by the upper classes that were also an essential feature of funerary practices. Royal tombs grew larger and more ornate, and typically included a main burial chamber and a number of lesser rooms.

Egypt's central government enforced cooperation among the semi-independent nomes. The early pharaohs appointed governors for the nomes, but these titles became hereditary and the district governors became virtually autonomous.

What we know of ancient Egyptian economy is vague. The land was owned by the state, meaning the pharaoh, the temples, and a few wealthy families. All of it was managed for the state's benefit. Workers earned wages in the form of food and other goods that could be bartered, since there was no currency until the New Kingdom introduced gold and silver. Egypt's population was small enough - and the Nile valley fertile enough - that the country usually produced a surplus of food, which was traded beyond Egypt's borders for copper, silver, olive oil, spices, turquoise, and timber, an especially important commodity since Egypt produced little wood.

It's estimated that the first two dynasties reigned for 415 years under fourteen rulers - nearly twice as long as the United States has existed to date. Government grew stronger, the elite grew intellectually, and new technologies and skills were honed. The Egyptians melted, molded, and hammered copper into highly decorated vessels and implements. They mastered stone cutting and invented faience, a glazed pottery that became a hallmark of Egyptian culture.

The Pyramid Builders

By the end of the second dynasty, about 2686 B.C., Egypt was reaching its first peak of power in what archeologists have come to call the Old Kingdom. Under the pharaoh [Djoser](#), the first king of the third dynasty, a new scale of

building and royal memorialization would create the country's most recognizable symbols: the great pyramids.

Among the remarkable founders of the Old Kingdom, and arguably one of the most remarkable men of all time, was Imhotep. He was Djoser's vizier - the highest official in the Egyptian bureaucracy - also known as the Steward of the Whole Land and Counselor of All Orders of the King. We know nothing of his background except that he was not of royal blood, but Imhotep's exceptional skill and intellect was so revered that he became a god. Best known as an architect, he also was well known as a writer, healer, and polymath. He designed Egypt's first all-stone structure, the pyramid, as a tomb for Djoser.

The [Step Pyramid](#) was built at [Saqqara](#), a necropolis (city of the dead) on the western edge of the desert at Memphis that would be the final resting place of numerous pharaohs over the years. Imhotep's pyramid stacked six rectangular layers, greatest to smallest - to a total height of 200 feet. It and its enclosing wall and temples remains mostly intact today. Stone replaced the mud bricks in constructing the temples, complete with wide columns designed to resemble bundles of papyrus stems, with hanging flowers carved at their crest. Blue earthenware tiles decorated some chambers.

This style of architecture and overall design scheme endured for centuries in Egypt - even a millennium later, columns and capitals maintained the look established by the early pyramids.

Surrounding Djoser's step pyramid was a wall more than thirty feet high. Within the wall were tombs and burial chambers for lesser persons associated with the pharaoh - a largess that further confirmed Djoser's divinity. Beneath the pyramid was a catacomb of chambers and tunnels that had a total length of more than three-and-a-half miles. The pharaoh's burial chamber, sealed with an immense stone after his funeral, was sheathed with finely polished granite - though it may have been originally finished in alabaster that was stripped away by tomb-robbers.

Imhotep's ideas inspired generations of royal architects and pharaohs. In the fourth dynasty, which began about 2613 B.C., the pharaohs oversaw the construction of a trio of

colossal pyramids at Giza. Centuries later, the Greeks ranked the pyramids among the [Seven Wonders of the World](#) – the other six being the [Colossus of Rhodes](#), the [Hanging Gardens of Babylon](#), the [Lighthouse at Alexandria](#), the [Mausoleum of Halicarnassus](#), the [Statue of Zeus at Olympia](#), and the [Temple of Artemis at Ephesus](#). Of all these monumental creations, only the pyramids still stand.

King Khufu, second to rule during the fourth dynasty, was entombed in the Great Pyramid, Giza's largest. With a base that covered thirteen acres, it stood 481 feet tall, and for almost 4,000 years, it was the tallest man-made structure in the world. By the time it was built, architects had perfected a system to design and build a pyramid. For the Great Pyramid, massive slabs of limestone were carved into more than 2 million two-and-a-half-ton blocks. Engineers still debate exactly how the structure was built. It was daunting to drag the great blocks of stone up long ramps to their assigned place; for all their technological genius, the Egyptians wouldn't be introduced to the wheel until 1500 B.C.

The Great Pyramid was finished with an outer layer of casing stones made from highly polished white limestone. A few of these still sit near the base of the pyramid, but most of them have long fallen away, having succumbed to earthquakes or appropriated for building projects in nearby Cairo.

The builders had only copper and stone tools to cut rocks, but their workmanship and precision was remarkable. The four sides of the base – 756 feet in length – differ by less than two-and-a-half inches, and the joints between casing stones have a gap of only one-fiftieth of an inch. The sides of the Great Pyramid are exactly aligned with the points of a compass. Unlike prior pyramids, the Great Pyramid's burial chamber, inner rooms, and passageways were built within the heart of the structure and are accessible by way of long, narrow tunnels. They are all empty; the mummies and any treasures Khufu entombed have long since been looted by grave-robbers.

It was Khufu's son [Khafre](#) who built the second pyramid at Giza, which, at 448 feet high, is only slightly smaller than the Great Pyramid. Khafre is also credited with carving the nearby [Great Sphinx](#), the colossal lion-bodied monument with the head of a man gazing enigmatically at the desert.

The Sphinx was carved from a single deposit of limestone, exposed by digging away the surrounding desert sand. Two hundred and forty-one feet long, sixty-three feet wide, and sixty-six feet tall, it awes even modern-day visitors used to giant structures; each outstretched front paw is twice the height of a man and longer than a city bus.

The name aptly symbolizes a riddle, but is also misleading, since it traces to a Greek myth - 2,000 years after the Sphinx was built - about a similar lion-bodied creature with wings and the head of a woman. Khafre left no indication what it symbolized. But the Sphinx, its two adjoining temples, and Khafre's pyramid are clearly aligned; one theory is that together they make up a sacred machine designed to harness the power of the sun to sustain the earthly and divine order. Later Egyptians used sphinxes of all sizes as motifs in jewelry and sacred sculptures, but no such figures have been found predating the Great Sphinx itself.

Herodotus presumed that these great structures were built by slaves. But ancient Egypt was not based on a slave economy, and Egyptologists now believe that the work was done by professional builders and craftsmen assisted by skilled laborers who were most likely farmers. Central coordination by the government was crucial to such projects, and it also appears that the ruling class distributed surplus food to abate local shortages, expanded the amount of arable land, and worked to maintain order and collect taxes.

Simplified hieroglyphs evolved until they more closely resembled handwriting, and trade, property, and government actions were recorded on papyrus, a thick, paper-like material made from dried, pressed reeds. The Egyptians also lifted their gaze to the stars, practicing astronomy, notably at Heliopolis - the City of the Sun - five miles east of the Nile and twenty miles north of Memphis.

Sculptures and carvings dominate the temples and tombs surrounding the pyramids. [Hemunu](#), believed to be the architect of the Great Pyramid, is immortalized in a masterful carving of his head. Detailed scenes from daily life are preserved in stone. Furniture in the tomb of Khufu's mother - including an armchair and grand canopy bed, all gilded and detailed with faience - is superbly designed. The pinnacle of Egyptian culture was on display in the Old Kingdom.

Token of Decline

At the close of the fourth dynasty, pharaohs stopped building enormous pyramids. The fifth and sixth dynasties produced tombs on a smaller scale, indicating a decline in the stature of the pharaohs and a fundamental evolution in Egyptian theocracy.

The sun god Ra assumed a place of prestige and dominance previously reserved for Horus, lifted up by priests at the City of the Sun, Heliopolis. Their divinity diminished, pharaohs became the Sons of Ra, and they were given a more mortal visage in post-fourth-dynasty portraits.

Egypt had become vital to the world. Explorers traveled to the [Land of Punt](#) – sometimes called the Land of God and probably situated on the coast of present-day Somalia - to obtain incense and spices, and even farther south into Africa for ebony, ivory, leopard skins, and [Pygmies](#). Military assaults of Asiatic fortresses, likely in Palestine, triumphed and brought back prisoners and treasure.

The sixth dynasty saw the pharaoh's power again diminished as the government structure that placed him at the center began to crumble. Years of corruption – marked by preferential treatment and appointments for family members - softened the pharaoh's grip on Egypt. Titles and estates were inherited, and the beneficiaries grew wealthier and more independent. In the towns, governors began to live like pharaohs on a smaller scale, and they were treated with the same reverence in death, with elaborate tombs, built close to home instead of near the king.

Around 2270 B.C., six-year-old [Pepi II](#) became pharaoh and began a ninety-year reign, the longest of any monarch in history. But this near century of stability masked a broad decline in the coherence and might of the nation. Pepi II grew weak as he aged, and royal authority plummeted as one after another of his designated heirs predeceased him. When he died, he was followed by a woman pharaoh, [Nitocris](#), whose rule ended after only two years. Anarchy ensued. The Old Kingdom, in which a mighty nation had been forged and wonders of the world had been built, ended.

The kingdoms of ancient Egypt did not follow each other

seamlessly, and after the collapse of the Old Kingdom, Egypt paused for more than a century in what is now called the [First Intermediate Period](#). Although the central government was fragmented and local rulers took charge of their districts, the social order held and the country became more egalitarian. Members of the lower classes built mud-brick tombs for themselves. These structures eventually disappeared, but many of the engraved stone funerary [stelae](#), on which the biographies of the dead were written, survived. The Egypt these biographies portray was intensely tribal, but still respectful of authority, and loyal to its hodgepodge of local chieftains.

Upper and Lower Egypt broke into many parts, each dominated by competing rulers or warlords. Without a strong central government to oppose them, nomads - Libyans and Asiatics who had fled to Egypt during times of famine or political turmoil - now came to settle, particularly in the delta. Foreign trade collapsed.

The predominant beliefs of the Old Kingdom - the certainty that a divine pharaoh and other gods would bring never-ending order, justice, and prosperity - had been destroyed. While the country sustained great losses in prestige and power and its people were burdened with hardships, the decline of the old order did have some benefits. People became more thoughtful, skeptical, and critical. The era gave birth to a new social morality. Under the Old Kingdom, young men were advised to be sober and diligent, respect tradition, and obey their elders and superiors. Now they were told to think for themselves, to have regard for their own souls, and to be just and generous to the poor and helpless.



3

A BRIEF
MIDDLE KINGDOM

In 2666 B.C., the Middle Kingdom began when Mentuhotep, a prince of Thebes in Upper Egypt, defeated his rivals in Lower Egypt. He united The Two Lands again, launching the eleventh dynasty with Thebes as its capital.

The inscriptions of this age show a continued interest in the new morality brought to the surface during the power vacuum at the end of the Old Kingdom. "Do not be evil," says one text, "for kindness is good. Make thy monument to be lasting through the love of thee." Another Middle Kingdom passage echoes another common ideal, attributing to the supreme god: "I made every man like his fellow." In other words, all men were created equal. With this newfound sense of individual worth came a fresh perspective of the pharaoh as a benevolent, caring monarch.

Over this 400-year period, the ascendance and decline of individual dynasties played a supporting role to cultural advancements and increasing contact with the outside world. Trade with Asia and Crete thrived. The energetic [Mentuhotep II](#), the fifth king of the era, solidified the reunification of Egypt so thoroughly that he was seen as a second Menes. Egyptians again surged southward into Nubia, seizing control of new lands and erecting a series of forts that extended to the Third Cataract.

All of the arts were re-energized as well, though they differed dramatically from what had come before. Memphis lost ground as the cultural hub, as painters and sculptors trained in academies in outlying areas. The tombs and burial pieces at the dawn of this age, though comparatively crude, were lively, fresh, and featured realistic details, which had not been an element of previous works. Pharaohs portrayed in stone and paint at the royal court in Thebes were more true to life, and showed great advances in technical skills. Artists of the twelfth dynasty created remarkable life-like statues of the pharaohs. Jewelry making also achieved a level of artistry never equaled in Egyptian history.

It wasn't long, however, before political upheaval upset the calm balance of the Middle Kingdom. Under [Amenemhet III](#), the last great pharaoh of the era, Egypt's population began to outrun food production. The pharaoh invited Asiatic settlers into Egypt to help build his monuments, and when the annual flooding of the Nile inexplicably dwindled late in his reign, the

government's granaries were slowly emptied. In 1786 B.C., near the dawning of a new dynasty, Amenemhet's order unraveled. The following 150 years, known as the [Second Intermediate Period](#), were marked by brief, often interrupted reigns, many shared by more than one leader.

Just as this rocky period seemed close to resolution, around 1674 B.C., outsiders seized control. The [Hyksos](#), meaning Rulers of the Uplands, from West Asia, slowly infiltrated Egypt, became kings and built their capital, Avaris, in the northeast. Archaeologists now say earlier assumptions that these were a conquering people are likely false, and that at least some of the Hyksos were invited to settle in the country by Amenemhet III.

Following the collapse of the Middle Kingdom, more outsiders wandered into The Two Lands – many herdsmen, like Joseph of the Bible story, were imprisoned and sold into slavery. Some found work as laborers and decided to stay.

Then, as Egypt's rule grew weak, the Asians overran Memphis. More than a thousand years later, Manetho recorded Egypt's subjugation: "[U]nexpectedly from the regions of the East invaders of an obscure race march[ed] in confidence of victory against our land. By main force they seized it easily without striking a blow; and having overpowered the rulers of the land, they then burned our cities ruthlessly . . . and treated all the natives with a cruel hostility."

There is evidence to suggest that Manetho's bleak view of the Hyksos occupancy overstates the Egyptians' plight. The Hyksos were evidently Semitic and not untalented at ruling. As they overcame the Egyptian government, they were careful not to displace its bureaucracy in a single stroke. Rather, they consolidated power gradually. They admired and imitated Egyptian art and culture, but were single-minded about another Egyptian practice: collecting taxes.

The Hyksos ruled Egypt for some 100 years. Modern Egyptologists think this occupation forced Egyptians to understand that the world had concerns that were larger than their nation and culture. The Hyksos brought Egypt much-improved weapons of war - a better bow; improved swords and daggers; and, perhaps most important, the horse-drawn

chariot. The concept of the wheel had finally arrived.

While the Hyksos kings took the prestigious place of pharaohs, the majority of Upper Egypt - from Asyut, on the western bank of the Nile, to the First Cataract - remained under the authority of a powerful and self-assured Theban prince named [Sekenenra](#). Known as The Brave, he exhorted his people to push out the Asiatic invaders.

The prince assembled an army and mounted a number of assaults against the Hyksos. He died in an early battle, but his fight was continued by his oldest son, [Kamose](#), who eventually won out over the Asian usurpers, avenging his father and liberating Egypt.

Record was kept of Kamose engaging the enemy Hyksos the morning after his soldiers spotted them while sailing down the Nile: "When the earth became light, I was on him as if it were a hawk . . . My soldiers were like lions with their prey . . . Your heart is undone, base Asiatic, who used to say 'I am lord, and there is none equal to me.'"

Kamose is believed to have suffered a similar fate to his father, dying in battle with the Asian invaders after a relatively short stint as pharaoh. Luckily for Egypt, their Theban lineage had more to offer. Sekenenra's Great Royal Wife [Ahhotep I](#), accustomed to ruling while the men waged war, dispatched another son, [Ahmose I](#) - who was only seven when his father died - to force out the last of the Hyksos.

The well-fortified Hyksos capital put up a valiant defense that lasted many years, but Ahmose eventually prevailed and ascended to pharaoh in 1570 B.C.

A New Imperial Age

The Hyksos introduced superior tools such as weaving looms, as well as a variety of musical instruments, including the lute, lyre, oboe, and tambourine. These and other changes were the foundation for another new beginning for Egypt. When Ahmose toppled the Hyksos regime and became king of both Upper and Lower Egypt, the splendid era of the New Kingdom began. During the next 500 years, Egypt's mightiest rulers would expand the nation's borders to their farthest limits, raise enormous monuments, commission thousands of works

of art, and create a vast trove of literature.



4

THE NEW KINGDOM

With Ahmose as pharaoh, Thebes, his home, became a new kind of capital. Its dry climate had thus far held back its development, and it wasn't as large as cities in Mesopotamia. Rather, Thebes was a religious hub, dominated by temples and palaces.

Gradually, however, residential areas grew up around these buildings, as the pharaohs required an increasing number of advisors, priests, scholars and soldiers. In turn, these mid-level citizens brought throngs of servants, slaves, and tradespeople into their employ. In time, Thebes would evolve into the richest and mightiest city in the world, and its natural setting equaled its man-made magnificence. Vegetable farms, orchards, cornfields, and groves of date palms flourished. As the city expanded, two clusters of temples were erected – at [Karnak](#) and [Luxor](#), connected by a broad boulevard. By 2000 B.C., Thebes had a population of 40,000.

To the west, the desert climbed steeply to the pyramidal mountain [Al-Qurn](#), where royal palaces and gardens rose up against the backdrop of the cruel, sunbaked valleys, where pharaohs were laid to rest in tombs.

Each side of the Nile's wider east bank was visible from the other, and small vessels ferried goods and passengers, including pharaohs (from palaces to temples), regularly across the expanse.

When Ahmose reunited Egypt and claimed the kingdom, traditions centering on religion, ritual, and the pursuit of *maat* resumed. Rites and festivals across Egypt dominated the pharaoh's time. The monarchy, one of history's most consistent and continuous, marched on.

The title of pharaoh was hereditary, and there were strict rules for accession to the throne. Generally, succession fell to the oldest son of the pharaoh and his great wife - his principal queen. Sometimes, if a son was not produced in the first marriage, the heir to the throne may be the son of a second wife. The pharaoh's first-born daughter, or royal heiress, could play a key role in the succession, as well. Though she would likely never be pharaoh, any prince who wed her had a claim. To keep royal blood undiluted, the pharaoh's daughter may also become his great wife – if a sister or half-sister was not available to continue his lineage.

Among a pharaoh's many wives, he might also take the daughters of foreign kings to cement alliances. He also often had concubines, kept in harems, which were ingrained in palace culture. Occasionally, the harem played a part in the succession of pharaohs. Even a concubine's son could become king when no other option existed.

This was how succession worked in theory, but often the rules were broken – which was the case when the kingdom was divided between two pharaohs; or the royal bloodline was diluted by a great wife taken from outside the family. And, perhaps the most significant of these broken traditions, three times in Egypt's long history, a woman became pharaoh.

Rites of Succession

Egyptians wasted no time in crowning their new pharaoh - as there must not be any gap in leadership – immediately transferring power upon their previous ruler's death.

But the coronation usually took place after an interval of several months. Burial of the new pharaoh's predecessor had to take place before the crowning ceremony, and embalming a fallen king's corpse required a minimum of ten weeks. Also, coronations only fell on festivals of renewal, usually New Year's Day, marking a fresh start for the kingdom.

During most of the New Kingdom, Thebes hosted coronation ceremonies. Crowns, not unlike the ones worn by Menes 1,600 years earlier, were presented to the pharaoh by high priests. At the first shrine adorned with the lotus emblem of Upper Egypt, the new king put on the conical White Crown, then at a second shrine, decorated with the papyrus-reed motif of Lower Egypt, he accepted the Red Crown – open and flat, curving into a winged-back, it fit over its white counterpart.

The pharaoh, Lord of the Two Lands, was expected to pay equal homage to Upper and Lower Egypt in all things, which often meant dual rituals. This duality exemplified by his coronation coursed through daily Egyptian life.

The pharaoh was presented with other crowns, each significant in its own way and often specifically for one occasion – such as the Blue Crown of the warrior king. He

was never seen with his hair – not even a single strand – uncovered.

Bejeweled and wrapped in a royal cape, the pharaoh, at the close of his coronation, grasped two scepters: one golden and resembling a shepherd's crook; the other a rod with three attached beaded strands, the [flail](#). Both paid tribute to Osiris.

A ceremonial walk, the Circuit of Walls, was also part of the coronation ritual – early pharaohs strode around the capital, to signify that he was "Lord of All that the Sun Encircles," but the circuit was abbreviated as the city grew.

For ordinary Egyptians, the coronation was an extended celebration. The capital pulsed for days before with the arrival of eager throngs, by land and sea. Thebes overflowed; the visitors slept in the streets and on rooftops. Common people were not allowed to enter the temple, though they found plenty of entertainment elsewhere. The dead king typically was buried in services the day before the coronation; goods and nobles arrived daily. Food and clothing were distributed to the poor, and there was beer for everyone.

Then there was the royal jubilee known as the *Sed* festival. Generally celebrated on a coronation anniversary, it was meant to give energy to the pharaoh – and reaffirm his power and the people's faith in him. It also ensured the pharaoh remained in harmony with the gods and nature, which was essential to secure divine blessings for Egypt. *Sed* could be mounted more than once, and mark any period of years – from one to thirty. The days-long festivities included parades, homages, and reenactments, in which, for example, the pharaoh might cross a field representing all of Egypt. The pharaoh paid tribute to the gods at shrines, and duplicated most rites to acknowledge both lands. All royal family members took part, and common people participated. To close the festival, archers shot arrows to the north, south, east and west, representing each side of a compass.

Festivals also took place in towns all along the Nile, and the pharaoh was expected to attend so he could be celebrated by his subjects. One such event, the Festival of Osiris, was a reenactment of his life and was attended by thousands of worshippers.

Pharaohs, too, had to balance administrative, political, and military affairs, but as a deity, his every action was deeply rooted in religion, marked by prayer and other rites.

The Supreme Warrior

At the height of the New Kingdom, Thebes was the center of an enormous amount of administrative business, with the pharaoh front and center. Whatever the matter at hand, whether irrigation projects, disaster response, taxation issues, appointments, or military matters, the king would meet first with his most-trusted vizier and treasurer. He then heard from officials, including provincial governors. Dispatches arrived from outside the realm that required the king's attention. Western Asia's princes communicated often with pharaohs, as evidenced by hundreds of clay tablets found at Amarna.

Little mind was paid to organizing a military. In the Old Kingdom, no standing army had been maintained. When trouble arose with a neighbor, a small force of soldiers could be easily recruited and dispatched by local nobles. During the Middle Kingdom, when civil order and a reunited central government had been forcibly established, it had been necessary to have a regular army to enforce Egyptian rule in Nubia, but in Egypt itself there was no formal military.

With the arrival of the New Kingdom, Egypt acquired a regular army for the first time. The military usually consisted of three or four 5,000-man divisions made up of a cadre of officers and legions of professional soldiers, with an elite force of charioteers.

Early in the New Kingdom, a succession of pharaohs undertook to secure Egypt's hold on Nubia by pacifying its citizens and strengthening Egyptian strongholds in the south. But there were still occasional revolts to be addressed, and the fighting was sometimes ferocious.

Some pharaohs actually led and fought with their forces in battle – unlike other kings in history, who commanded their armies and navies from their thrones, safe at home, though official inscriptions may give them credit for a proud victory on the battlefield.

A pharaoh's judicial responsibilities ranked high among his royal responsibilities. Although absolute, his power was not arbitrary. Egyptians expected their leader to keep peace and order, and to fairly mete out justice. In these matters, the king should exemplify *maat*.

Only the pharaoh could order someone put to death, or commute that sentence. Subjects with only the most severe and vital cases could petition the king directly; all others went through his vizier, who counseled the pharaoh in passing final judgment.

The practical and religious aspects of the kingship were closely tied with the pharaoh's judicial responsibilities, which were symbolized in the person of a goddess, whose name often appeared among the king's sacred titles. The principle of *maat* was personified as the goddess *Maat*, the beautiful daughter of the sun god Ra. She was often depicted in coronation scenes with the pharaoh.

The pharaoh, given the authority of a god during the Old Kingdom, was still considered divine in the New Kingdom. In Egypt and elsewhere, the principle of divine right to rule remains familiar, but something more set apart the pharaoh, who was, as the vizier of Thutmose III said, "the god by whose guidance men live."

The mythologies of the ancient Egyptians were fluid and involved a great deal of interchangeability among the gods and between the gods and the pharaohs. Pharaohs could represent any god on the broad Egyptian spectrum, depending on occasion and place. In visiting the various nomes in his kingdom, he took on the attributes of the gods worshipped there. But the three deities he was always associated with were Horus, Osiris, and Ra.

Legend credits Ra with creating the world by ascending into the heavens on the "primeval hill" – where land first breached a vast, endless ocean. This feat earned him the honor of Egypt's first pharaoh, from whom everyone who followed inherited the right to rule as a son of Ra. The Old Kingdom held Ra in the highest order.

The Middle Kingdom belonged to Amon, the chief god of Thebes, where the grandest temples paid tribute to "the

hidden one.”

Centuries later, in the New Kingdom, the two traditions were united in a new supreme deity, Amon-Ra.

The Two Lands, united as they were under the same pharaoh, often veered from each other in distinctions among deities – though their gods took different forms, they often shared the same attributes or served a similar purpose. In Upper Egypt, the goddess [Nekhbet](#), taking the form of a vulture, was a protector, shown with wings spread above the pharaoh’s head on his White Crown. In Lower Egypt, that job went to the goddess Wazet, a cobra, who adorned the king’s Red Crown, and spit at his enemies to keep him safe. The cobra was the most commonly worn royal insignia, and sometimes is featured adjacent to a vulture, such as on the funerary mask of King Tutankhamen. Also known as the “the two ladies,” the serpent and vulture sometimes appear in young female form alongside the pharaoh.

Colossal statues portraying the pharaoh as a giant towering over his enemies dominate the art adorning the ancient Egyptian temples, and depictions of his life and death painted the massive walls surrounding and comprising them.

Scale in artwork of the era was according to importance – thus the pharaoh’s disproportionate size to his lesser foes, often depicted in defeat, being held in submission by their hair. Sometimes, murals show the pharaoh riding into battle or to a wild-beast hunt on his chariot. Usually, though, he mingles with the gods – on equal footing with Amon-Ra or holding hands with Isis.

The reverence and prestige placed on their leader is evident in the monumental effort and painstaking precision put into the royal art and artifacts, and the riches lavished on the pharaohs’ tombs.

Preparing for the Afterlife

But of course the pharaoh was mortal, no matter how many *Sed* festivals he celebrated. While he lived like a god, he never forgot his own mortality, making elaborate plans and supervising the construction of his tomb.

In the New Kingdom, pyramids were no longer suitable for

the burial of pharaohs, primarily because of the problem of thievery, and were abandoned. An architect of [Thutmose I](#) conceived a plan to hide the royal tombs, and the treasures within their funeral chambers, from would-be plunderers – “the hewing out of the rock tomb of His Majesty in the solitary place where nobody could look on and where nobody could listen.” The inconspicuous [Valley of the Kings](#), west of Thebes, is overlooked by the mountain called al-Qurn, known to ancient Egyptians as The Peak. This pyramid-shaped mountain must have appealed to the pharaohs of the New Kingdom, who built a complex necropolis of royal tombs in the valley below. About a mile to the southwest is the [Valley of the Queens](#); interred on the slopes in between were many nobles and officials.

It was believed that the valleys’ relative inaccessibility - and the elite guards recruited to protect the tombs – would safeguard the pharaohs and their possessions. But as the centuries have passed, virtually all of the tombs have been plundered, though the vestiges of artwork and artifacts that remain hint of the opulence of the New Kingdom. The nearly intact state of Tutankhamen’s tomb, when it was uncovered in 1922 in the Valley of the Kings, stunned the world. The treasures and trinkets discovered within, such as the now-iconic golden burial mask, were dazzling to behold.

Cutting tombs into blank rock was in many ways as challenging as pyramid building. Tomb builders looked for natural openings or a slope with loose rock that could be easily excavated. Most of the rock faces in the valley consist of irregular layers of limestone and other sedimentary rocks that are interspersed with shale that expands when wet. Although the valley is a dry place, like all of Egypt, occasional storms flood it and many tombs were heavily damaged or destroyed over the millennia.

Carved intricately into the roughly hewn limestone passageways, hieroglyphs were meant to be a road map to guide the fallen pharaoh past potential pitfalls on his way to eternity. Depicted in the first scenes is the pharaoh’s reunion with sun god Ra; deeper in the tomb, the imagery is overtaken by king of the afterlife Osiris’s underworld of monsters and the dead. Somber, dark and foreboding, pharaohs’ tombs were in stark contrast to those of ordinary Egyptians, which celebrated everyday life.

Egyptians' postmortem practices and preparations for the afterlife stem from the legend of Osiris' resurrection. Burials, only providing meager essentials for the voyage to eternity early on, quickly became more elaborate. Riches stocked in tombs were meant to be currency in the afterlife. Kingly and other important corpses were *mummified*, preserved for the spirits' eventual return.

A pharaoh's corpse was taken to embalmers, who treated it with *natron* - a natural sodium carbonate - and a variety of oils and aromatics. His organs were removed and stored in *canopic jars*, made of limestone. These practices fell under the auspices of the jackal god Anubis, who weighed the hearts of the dead.

Powders sapped the moisture from the body during mummification. Priests laid golden jewels on the dehydrated corpse, believing that gold's incorruptible properties would transfer to the pharaoh. Linen wrapped the body, layered with more gold, and over the chest was placed a scarab, representing the heart. A final preservative darkened and dried the skin. The corpse was, by now, no more than a tightly wrapped assemblage of bone, cartilage, and desiccated skin.

The pharaonic mummies were then placed in elaborate, sometimes gold, coffins, nesting one within the other.

During the mummification process, the Egyptians believed their king was somewhere between life and death - his *ka*, or vital energy, simply in a state of waiting, for his journey into the afterlife. In hieroglyphs and paintings, the king's *ka* was depicted as his twin. Though a commoner's *ka* was never shown, the belief was the pharaoh gave all people their life energy.

In death, the king would become one with Osiris, embark on the boat of the sun god, and sail with him through the gates of the west into the afterworld. Then, having triumphed over the powers of darkness, he would attain eternal life as his father Ra climbed in the eastern sky. Walled into the mountain though he was, the king would not be lost to his people. As a divine ancestor, he would help them in this world, and as Osiris, he would improve their lot in the next.



5

THE WOMAN
WHO WOULD BE KING

With a military strategy that changed from defensive to offensive, increasingly ambitious pharaohs looked "to extend the frontiers of Egypt." King Ahmose's armies had chased the conquered Hyksos invaders into Palestine to quash any future threat. This campaign to liberate Egypt had strengthened and organized the pharaoh's forces, and built up their arsenal. Chariots, horse-drawn and driven by an archer, led them into battle, volleying arrows into swarms of enemy combatants. With every victory, their capital of Thebes grew in power and wealth.

Pharaohs periodically engaged in battle with Libyans from the Western Desert, but most of their conflicts were with Nubians to the south and their Asiatic rivals northeast.

Conquering Nubia was no difficult feat for the Egyptians, who easily navigated the treacherous cataracts of the Nile, and seized crucial spoils of copper, gold, and semiprecious stones such as amethyst, as well as ivory and cattle. In defeat, the Nubians, more pliable than Egypt's other neighbors, adopted Egyptian customs. A pharaoh-appointed regent - the King's Son and Overseer of the Southern Countries - represented Egypt's interests in Nubia during the eighteenth dynasty.

Egypt's conquering armies faced stiffer challenges in Palestine and Syria, situated across hot desert sands and bodies of water in the western Asian territories, beyond which an even greater threat encroached. [Assyrians](#), the [Mitanni](#), and the [Hittites](#) pressed westward from Asia, challenging the Egyptians' ambitious bid for world supremacy.

Borders were not clearly delineated. Loose groupings of city-states made up Palestine and Syria, inhabited by an assortment of [Amorites](#), Canaanites, [Phoenicians](#), and others who ceaselessly warred with one another. A climate of perpetual unrest was the result of contentious alliances, carelessly forged and easily broken.

Egypt's conquests were not without great risk, although early on, many lesser monarchs submitted almost willingly, recognizing Egypt's resurgence and new might, and heaping respect on the pharaoh. In the south, Amenhotep I, son and heir of Ahmose, looked to tighten Egypt's grip on Nubia. The more ambitious Thutmose I next became pharaoh, by way of his marriage to a royal princess, Amenhotep I's sister. His

claim was tenuous, and he set out to bolster it with conquests.

A veteran admiral navigating the Nile with the king, described him as "raging like a panther," recounting a tale in which Thutmose, armed with a bow and arrow, killed a Nubian chieftain, and displayed his corpse like a grisly trophy on his ship's prow.

Such brutality was common. Stacks of dismembered hands frequent temple artwork, telling of the mutilations that often befell the Egyptians' conquered foes. Just as common in wall carvings are portrayals of pharaohs, gripping enemies by the hair, the royal mace raised and ready to smash their skulls.

Thutmose followed up his brutal conquest in Nubia with an unprecedented 1,300-mile expedition to Syria, which crossed the Euphrates River – farther from Thebes than any other pharaoh had ever ventured. The king's men took up arms against the Mitanni, invaders from the north. A stone marker planted on the field of battle claims a massive slaughter of Mitanni, and the taking of many more as prisoners.

The third generation of his family to claim the throne, Thutmose III was the only other pharaoh to go as far into hostile Asian territory, and finding his grandfather's marker still in place, he put one of his own alongside it.

Treasure from conquered lands poured into the blossoming capital, funding new construction and more and elaborate temple art and adornments on the shores of the Nile.

A daughter, Hatshepsut was born to Thutmose I and great wife Ahmes; and a son, Thutmose, came from a secondary marriage. The half-siblings followed common royal practice and wed. When the old king died (he was the first pharaoh to be buried in the Valley of the Kings), they took the throne as King Thutmose II and great wife, though Hatshepsut – the daughter of a king who had taken his place in the afterlife alongside the gods, and now the new king's wife and sister – quickly became a much more indomitable force than the pharaoh. Thutmose II's early reign is mostly insignificant, the only record of which being a revolt in Nubia and skirmishes in Palestine. The pharaoh and his great wife did not produce a son, so at the time of his death, the son of a concubine

named Iset was crowned Thutmose III. Rather than taking the throne outright, however, the young pharaoh faced a significant challenge from his stepmother-aunt, Hatshepsut.

Not satisfied for long serving as the new king's regent, Hatshepsut believed her power and pure royal blood gave her the right to rule. Several years into Thutmose III's reign, she wore the crowns of The Two Lands as co-ruler, while he faded into the background.

A female pharaoh presented unprecedented challenges, small and large. Depictions of Hatshepsut were clumsily adapted by inscribers and sculptors accustomed to the male form. In many, she appears without breasts, dressed in male garments and a false beard common among kings' wardrobe, though the artists eventually got a better grasp for shapely figure and vestments. These small matters did nothing to tarnish a reign that was overall a prosperous success.

Hatshepsut surrounded herself with trusted and influential advisors. As her vizier, she chose [Hapuseneb](#), a High Priest of Amon, who brought political prestige to her royal court. Closer to her was another remarkable man, an arrogant, industrious commoner named [Senenmut](#).

Senenmut was arrogant and greedy - he amassed no fewer than eighty ranks in his royal capacity, including Steward of the God's Wife and Steward of the King. He also presumed to be buried in a tomb alongside the queen, and in her temple, he had memorials to himself erected. Some Egyptologists have speculated that he was Hatshepsut's lover.

Hatshepsut restored a number of temples that had fallen into disrepair while the invading Hyksos ruled Egypt, and made additions, including two obelisks, at Karnak. The most notable contribution to the landscape during her reign was the Senenmut-designed burial chamber at [Deir el-Bahri](#), opposite Karnak. With considerable imagination, it sprang up on a cliff, in a natural amphitheater, only a small sliver of rock between it and the Valley of the Kings. Its steep walls were striped in soft pink and buff stone. King Mentuhotep was entombed on this site.

Higher and considerably grander in scale, Hatshepsut's temple was three stories, framed with majestic columns. It is

one of the most remarkable of Egypt's structures, easily Thebes' greatest marvel. Sphinxes once lined the ground leading up to its entrance, on two immense shallow terraces that ascend to the base of the cliff of al-Qurn. Vines and palm trees added a lush greenery to a courtyard beneath the foundation of the first terrace. Stunning buildings on the next level followed a long portico, where once twenty-six imposing statues of Hatshepsut once stood regally, depicting her as the god Osiris. Within the depths behind the portico, a great hall and sanctuaries surround the queen's final resting place. The magnificent white limestone of the temple stands in stark contrast to the craggy cliffs into which it is hewn. The same material comprises the innermost sanctuary, the holy of holies.

Sanctuaries within paid tribute to the goddess [Hathor](#) (who took a cow's form), the jackal Anubis, and sun god Ra. A number of reliefs amaze with scenes of enormous obelisks – nearly as long as the boats bearing them down the Nile from the island of Elephantine to Thebes. One of a quartet that once stood in the capital, reaching close to 100 feet into the sky – remains today in Amon's temple at Karnak. A single huge slab of pink granite quarried at Aswan, was patiently and skillfully carved to form each obelisk.

The first terrace artwork features two distinctly different milestones for the queen. In one, she is molded on a potter's wheel by the ram-headed god [Khnum](#), as her mother, Ahmes, sits primly alongside the god Amon, who says: "Hatshepsut shall be the name of this my daughter whom I have placed in thy body. She shall exercise excellent kingship in this whole land." This is meant to portray that Hatshepsut was of divine conception, a myth propagated by the queen.

Another depicts the ambitious and lucrative expedition the queen dispatched to the trading center of [Punt](#) to enrich her treasury with African goods. About a half-dozen years into her reign, she ordered a Nubian named Nehery to lead the assembly from [Qift](#), north of Thebes, across the desert to the Red Sea, where a pair of ships, laden with cheering sailors in the reliefs, would carry them down the coast to Punt. Here, people made their homes – round, high, domed huts with laddered entrances – among the palm groves. Nehery and his men were greeted by Punt's queen, and "did not trouble to conceal their laughter," the inscription reads, at her

deformities, huge thighs and a harsh, strained face.

The people of Punt fell to the ground before an emblem of Hatshepsut: "They speak, praying for peace from Her Majesty: Hail to thee, king of Egypt, female sun who shines like the solar disk." The pharaoh's envoy Nehery set up camp, offering the natives a royal tribute of beer, fruit, meat, and wine.

A disproportionate bartering came after, in which the Egyptians got the better of the people of Punt, exchanging beads for baboons, ebony, gold, ivory, leopard skins, and myrrh trees (a prized commodity in Punt). Hatshepsut and Senenmut welcomed the company and its bounty back to the capital as the young Thutmose III burned incense at the foot of a massive statue of Amon.

"The Napoleon of Egypt"

Until recently, conventional wisdom among Egyptologists held that Thutmose III resented Hatshepsut's assumption to the throne, which postponed his reign for twenty-one years. After her death, there was a systematic effort to obliterate or deface her temples and monuments, along with those of Senenmut, which was taken as *prima facie* evidence of her nephew's hostility. But the weight of the evidence has swung, and most scholars now agree that Hatshepsut and Thutmose III got along well.

One factor that points to a warm relationship: Hatshepsut never denied Thutmose III the title of pharaoh, even after she took the throne. What's more, as he grew older, she gave him command of the Egyptian army – a sign of trust on her part. For his part, Thutmose made no effort to use the military to overthrow Hatshepsut, and he retained most of her officials after he succeeded her. He also married her daughter and placed his mortuary temple next to hers. Finally, the defacing of her monuments began twenty years after he was crowned – hardly a sign of hot-headed resentment.

The judgment now is that the vandalizing of Hatshepsut's temples and statues was an effort by Thutmose III to erase doubts about his own claim to the throne as the son of a concubine, and thus reinforce the legitimacy of his son and heir, Amenhotep I. Thutmose also made Amenhotep his co-

ruler in the last years of his reign, and it is possible that Amenhotep was behind the vandalism of Hatshepsut's monuments.

Whatever the case, their co-reign came to an end with Hatshepsut's death in 1482 B.C. Thutmose III ruled Egypt the next thirty years unassisted and unencumbered.

Five feet, four inches in height, the pharaoh had a keen, alert face, dominated by his family's protruding nose. Upon his coronation, he inherited prosperity and a full treasury, but Egypt's empire in Asia was crumbling.

Egypt's most formidable foes in Palestine and Syria had aligned behind the king of the city of [Kadesh](#), where a mighty fortress stood on the [Orontes River](#), in western Syria. The resurgent Mitanni added to this threat against the Egyptians.

In his second year as ruler, Thutmose III began his mission to "overthrow that vile enemy and to extend the borders of Egypt as commanded by his father, Amon," according to a scribe accompanying the pharaoh on the campaign, who inscribed his reports in the temple of Amon.

Thutmose's expedition traversed the modern-day Suez Canal, then a ten-day trek through the Sinai Peninsula, before finally capturing the Philistine city of Gaza. The pharaoh's forces, acting on intelligence, moved quickly north to intercept the Kadesh coalition at Megiddo, where the plains stretched out beyond the hills of Mount Carmel. Three possible routes to Megiddo were debated by war strategists – dual options for low and open approaches were favored by generals, who argued against the tight, single-file passages that they would have to navigate on direct path over the hills. Thutmose, however, opted for the latter route, and his officers followed in step: "We are in the train of Your Majesty wherever Your Majesty will go. The servant will follow his master."

A thin line of soldiers wound up through the desolate, scrub-filled valleys, the pharaoh atop his glimmering chariot, the bronze of his armored tunic shining like a fish's scales. On his head sat the warrior's crown, blue and etched with a golden cobra. Other chariots rattled and bumped in his wake, archers poised for battle. Some overturned. A sea of short, rounded shields – planks covered with cow or deer hides – represented

thousands of foot soldiers, armed with bronze axes, daggers, and spears.

The feared ambush never happened. The Kadesh army had prepared an attack on the plain, expecting Thutmose's forces to take the longer, flatter route to Megiddo. The pharaoh's call proved to be the right one. Night was falling as the Egyptians descended the hills, so they set up camp. Thutmose told his soldiers to "prepare yourselves, make ready your weapons, for we will engage with that vile enemy in the morning."

But the Egyptians delayed the attack, perhaps in anticipation of a new moon, considered good luck. The time finally right, Thutmose prayed to Amon, and unleashed his army. The soldiers set up north of Megiddo, and south of Kina brook, with the king in between. Thutmose and his men fought courageously, upending enemy chariots. The Kadesh allies fled on foot to Megiddo, where the gates were shuttered, forcing them to scale the walls.

The pharaoh's greed led to a missed opportunity for a prompt end to the fight: "Would that the army of His Majesty had not set their hearts upon looting . . . for they would have captured Megiddo at that moment, while the vile enemy of Kadesh and the vile enemy of the town were being hoisted up." Time and tactical advantage lost to plundering extended the battle many months, during which the Egyptians laid siege to Megiddo. The town's defenses eventually succumbed, but by then the Kadesh king had escaped, living to bring the pharaoh more trouble in the future.

The Egyptians brought a tremendous load of plunder from Megiddo. According to the records, the spoils included: ". . . 340 living prisoners; 83 hands [cut off dead bodies]; 2,041 mares, 191 foals, 6 stallions; a chariot wrought with gold, as was its pole [property of the ruler of Kadesh]; a beautiful chariot wrought with gold [property of the ruler of Megiddo]; thirty chariots belonging to other chiefs plus 892 chariots belonging to his wretched army; a fine suit of bronze armor belonging to that enemy [the ruler of Kadesh] and 200 suits of armor belonging to his wretched army; 502 bows; seven poles wrought with silver to the tent of that foe; 1,929 large cattle, 2,000 small cattle, 20,500 white small cattle."

The Megiddo campaign is the earliest full account of a decisive battle. In spite of later victories, Thutmose liked to celebrate this one, evidently feeling that the rest of his reign flowed from it. From then on, he consolidated his conquests as he pushed toward Mesopotamia. As he conquered each new city-state, he established a garrison and manned it with foreign mercenaries. To ensure future allegiance, he took the sons of conquered kings back to Egypt and trained them to be his lieutenants before he returned them to their homelands. Thutmose also took great pains to defend and provision ports on the Syrian coast in order to secure safe passage for his navy, which transported troops and supplies.

The pharaoh sculpted his army into a strong, efficient body – and among its vital components were chariot riders, infantry, naval operations, signals, accountancy, and supplies. Although he was formidable on the battlefield, Thutmose's logistical and organizational skills most impressed later military historians.

The pharaoh's fifth campaign crippled northern Syria's wealthy seafaring cities. A year later, Kadesh's imposing fortress at last fell to the Egyptian army. The year was 1471 B.C., and Thutmose was finally ready to confront the Mitanni, Egypt's greatest hurdle to world domination. But to do that, his army would have to cross the Euphrates River. So, at [Byblos](#), he ordered ships constructed of Lebanon's famous cedar to be dragged along as the army marched.

The campaign was an unmitigated success. The Egyptians' approach from the river was smooth, and caught the Mitanni off guard, with no defensive army in place to counter the attack. The pharaoh boasted he was out front for the victory, "the first of his army in seeking that vile enemy over the mountains of Mitanni, while [the enemy] fled before His Majesty to another far distant land." To mark the conquering of his arch-enemies, Thutmose III erected his stela not far from his grandfather's.

In another nod to Thutmose I, the pharaoh allowed himself an elephant-hunting diversion in the northern Syrian swamps of [Niya](#). Although he had escaped the war without injury, he almost lost his life on the hunt. The quick reflexes of a general accompanying the pharaoh on the hunt put down a charging bull elephant before it could trample Thutmose.

General Amenemhab leapt between the king and beast, severing the elephant's "hand" – likely trunk - with his sword, saving both their lives.

While all pharaohs hunted, Thutmose's genuine interest in wildlife extended beyond killing and mounting it. He often returned from conquests laden with species of plants and animals from distant lands in Asia – including, once, a rhinoceros from Nubia.

New buildings sprang up during Thutmose's reign, including, in Karnak, a large pavilion, suitable for a *Sed* festival, and a monumental temple gate depicting him as a conqueror with mace raised over kneeling Asiatics. Similar to Hatshepsut, he had a fascination with obelisks – of the several he erected, two have withstood time; moved from their original home in Heliopolis to the Thames Embankment in London, and New York City's Central Park.

Thutmose's seventeen campaigns over a twenty-year period amassed enormous wealth for Egypt. His conquests expanded the country's borders north of Syria to Niya, east beyond the Euphrates, and south to Nubia – earning his empire the distinction of being Egypt's greatest, and him the nickname "the Napoleon of Egypt." In tribute to the might of imperial Egypt, awed world leaders heaped gold and goods onto Thebes.

The age of conquest at its end, the capital basked in extravagance and luxury, which would peak during the long, peaceful reign of Thutmose's great-grandson, Amenhotep III.



6

THE HAREM GIRL'S
HUSBAND

In 1390 B.C., [Amenhotep III](#) took the throne. More a hunter than a warrior, the pharaoh amassed many animal trophies. On one expedition, ninety-six bulls were felled by the pharaoh and his company, and Amenhotep boasted killing more than 100 lions on his own.

He was an egotistical, luxury-loving, self-indulgent ruler. He gloried in being called The Magnificent and was determined that the world should know of his greatness. He built temples by the score in Thebes and across Egypt and Nubia.

Amenhotep III may have invented the press release. Early in his reign, he began sending out official notices about his activities – often exaggerated tales of his hunting exploits - in the form of large stone scarabs, amulets modeled in the shape of scarab beetles and engraved with hieroglyphs on the underside. These made their way across Egypt and a fair portion of the known world, and many were discovered centuries later from lands as distant as Sudan and Syria.

Among the subjects of these dispatches was Amenhotep's marriage to a remarkable woman, who, like Hatshepsut, held great influence over the throne. In ancient Egypt, property passed from one generation to the next through the female, so marrying a woman of property enlarged the pharaoh's claim to rule. But while he was still new to the throne, Amenhotep broke protocol by finding his queen and great wife in a harem. Tiye was not an heiress, nor of royal blood, but she exerted power as the king's consort – even after their son, Amenhotep IV, assumed the crown.

Contemporary scholars suggest that Amenhotep III's choice of Tiye was a complex one and that she was perhaps more than a commoner with whom he fell in love. Tiye was a child when they were married, and it's more probable that the union was engineered by Tiye's father, Yuya, a man of considerable influence in the royal court. Yuya was the king's lieutenant of chariotry and master of the horses as well as a temple official in his home town of Akhmim in Upper Egypt. He may even have been Amenhotep's uncle. Amenhotep held him in high regard, as Yuya was eventually buried in the Valley of Kings – an extraordinary honor for a commoner.

But there's no question that Amenhotep III became devoted to Tiye, or that he enjoyed female company in general. The

king's harem was considerable, and his wives numerous – many the daughters of foreign kings, marriages brokered to maintain peace. One was a princess from Mitanni – Egypt's relationship with its once arch-nemesis had become cordial. Four decades into his reign, a daughter with his great wife Tiye – named Sitamun - joined the pharaoh's contingent of wives. Old, obese, and feeble, Amenhotep wed a niece of his first Mitanni wife – daughter of new Mitanni king - [Tushratta](#), whose plan to install her as queen of Egypt faced great opposition from great wife Tiye.

In his queen Tiye's name, Amenhotep ordered the construction of a huge lake - 1,200 feet across and more than a mile long. It took only fifteen days to dig. Tiye was the first Egyptian queen to be depicted alongside the pharaoh in memorials, and the first to have her name inscribed with his on official documents. When the king of Mitanni wrote a letter seeking continuing good relations between the two nations after Amenhotep died and his son took the throne, he sent it to Tiye rather than to the new pharaoh.

Treasures poured into the capital as tribute to the monarchy from the towns and cities, but perhaps just as much went out - the pharaoh and his court shared the wealth generously with Egypt's allies – indicating a preference to pay for peace directly rather than with expensive military campaigns. The pharaoh's generosity may have spoiled his allied Asian kings, who came to think gold from the capital was available at a moment's notice. "My brother," the Mitanni king Tushratta wrote to Amenhotep III, "pray send gold in very great quantities, such as cannot be counted; my brother may send me more gold than my father got. In the land of my brother, is not gold as dust upon the ground?"

Gold was not quite that abundant, though stockpiles in Egypt's eastern deserts, especially Nubia, financed a luxurious life for the pharaoh and queen, whose wardrobes were laden with exquisite gold and jewels. Palace furnishings were inlaid with gold and ivory details, and containers of carved alabaster stored fine perfumes and aromatics. Gilded chariots – with ostrich feathers tied in the manes and tails of the horses – carried Amenhotep and Tiye.

A lavish new palace was built in the capital. Made mostly of brick, its foundation, entranceways and columns were stone.

Painted doves fluttered across the spacious palace's ceiling – a theme carried in paintings throughout.

Festivities were hosted at the queen's lake, surrounded by lush, colorful gardens, during which wine, aromatic oils, flowers and gifts were lavished on guests, and women danced to music played by the lake – and sometimes aboard pleasure boats floating just off shore - well into the evening.

The Aten Gleams, a barge decked in golden circles whose name means "the sun disk gleams," was property of the queen, though Tiye's young son often took it out on the lake. He was deeply interested in nature, and took pleasure in watching waterfowl.

Singing Statue

The traditional supremacy of Ra, the sun god, was coming into increasing conflict with Amon, the relatively new king of the gods, and the strain was felt in the capital. Amon's followers, now in the tens of thousands, had adopted the name Amon-Ra for their god only in deference to royal family and the Ra worshippers up north. Over the years, pharaohs and rich nobles had been generous in paying homage to the Thebes temple of Amon-Ra, but their gifts of gold and property were not altogether altruistic - they sought the god's favor in life and the afterlife.

Amon-Ra's influence surged as his priests grew in number and power, and the god's temples expanded on massive tracts of land to become among the largest in the world. The high priest of Amon-Ra at Thebes had more power than Ptah at Memphis. An entire community of stewards, granaries, cattlemen, crafters, and law enforcers rose up around the Amon priesthood.

A rivalry started between the king of the gods, Amon, and the monarchy, which Amenhotep and Tiye worked diligently to constrain. The royals sought help from Heliopolis and Memphis, where jealousy seethed for the Amon upstarts, and Ra loyalists were eager to re-establish a connection with the throne.

To diminish the power of Amon's priests, Amenhotep III encouraged his people to worship him. He commissioned

sculptors to create life-like images to be worshipped the same as Amon-Ra's. Soon, a statue cult emerged that extended south as far as [Soleb](#), in today's Sudan.

An unfinished funerary temple in Thebes' western desert featured a pair of massive statues showing the self-conscious pharaoh seated and flanked to the left by his mother and Queen Tiye to the right, both much smaller in stature.

A single block of stone was used to carve the seventy-foot statues, each heavier than even the most impressive obelisks. They were erected by yet another remarkable commoner and man of the court – [Amenhotep, Son of Hapu](#), and, like King Djoser's notorious architect, Imhotep, he was revered as a sage.

The statues were quarried from a vein of quartzite sandstone near present-day Cairo. Too heavy to be transported by boat up the Nile – they weighed more than 700 tons each - they were hauled overland more than 400 miles to Thebes.

Known traditionally as the [Colossi of Memnon](#), they gained new notoriety in 27 B.C., when an earthquake cracked one of them in two. The stone began to vibrate, making a noise that people likened to singing. The Greek author [Pausanias](#) said it sounded like the string of a lyre breaking, and on most days it sounded as dawn was breaking. Its "voice" was silenced when a visiting Roman emperor had the statue repaired.

Brewing conflict in the Asiatic provinces and illness probably stopped construction on Amenhotep's temple. Three *Sed* festivals during his third decade as pharaoh sought to give him renewed energy, but failed; he died after thirty-eight years on the throne. His young son, Amenhotep IV, took his place on Egypt's throne.

A Rebel Against the Gods

Amenhotep IV was in fact the studious, sensitive boy who sailed on Tiye's royal barge and had been so struck by the natural world in his mother's gardens. He was an unheroic pharaoh, effeminate and dainty. He didn't hunt, shoot, throw a spear, or excel at other sports befitting royals; he favored art and poetry. He was a genius, and his nearly unmatched intellect proved at least as powerful as an army - applied to

the spiritual realm, it hatched an idea that shook the very heavens beneath the gods' feet.

The boy pharaoh, growing up, was witness to power struggle between his parents, Amon's priests and their rival followers of Ra. Now in a position of power himself, he came down on neither the side of Amon or Ra, instead focusing on the worship of the [Aten](#), the divinity of the sun's disk.

As far back as Thutmose III's reign, priests of the Aten had worshipped in a small temple in the capital. References to Aten in sacred texts may symbolize a god or the sun itself, but they became more prominent.

Early in his reign, like his parents, Amenhotep IV strived to separate himself from Amon, though he was linked with Ra. But he identified most with the Aten, and built a new sanctuary for the divinity at Karnak, where a new symbol – the sun's rays extending human hands down to the earth – was prominently displayed. He later expressed his concept in poetry: The sun provided love and protection and a vital power that blessed humankind and every other living thing. The first among the people to feel this beneficence was the young pharaoh himself.

Then he took it a step further, deciding that the Aten was the only true god. All the traditional gods of the Egyptians were not just demoted, but obliterated. He changed his name to Akhenaton. Although not the first monotheist in the world, he was the first with the power to make his creed official. Even for a pharaoh, it was a risky step to take.

Until now, Queen Tiye was probably sympathetic to her son, who was so unlike her in his unworldliness and his religious inspiration. It's doubtful, however, that she supported his decision to make a religious revolution out of his beliefs. What provoked his apostasy is not clear, although afterward, the young king somberly referred to the priests of Amon doing deeds even more abominable than those they had done in the past. Whatever happened, Amenhotep took decisive action. He changed his name, proclaiming himself Akhenaten – "he who is serviceable to the Aten." In an even more momentous decision, he resolved to move the capital from Thebes and found a new city away from the old imperial luxury, the old clutter of gods and their idols, and above all, away from

Amon and his priests.

About this time, he chose an exquisite young woman named [Nefertiti](#) to be his great wife and queen. It is possible she was his half-sister, but the pharaoh's passion for her was open and intense to a level other pharaohs would have found inappropriate. Nefertiti joined her king's religious revival.

Six years into his reign, Akhenaten, his queen and their first daughter, Meritaten, took a royal barge down the Nile to scout locations for their City of God. Halfway to Memphis - more than 200 miles north of Thebes, with their troubles far behind - they arrived at a crescent of rock that might have reminded Akhenaten of the hieroglyph for "horizon." Only a few peasants' houses occupied the fertile bank. The pharaoh said: "I found this place that belonged to no god or goddess, to no prince or princess - no one can lay claim to it." At the dawn of a new day, a chariot carried Akhenaten until the sun's rays signaled for him to stop - there, he started to build his capital, [Akhetaten](#), "Horizon of the Aten."

The pharaoh paid tribute to his god, who he said had guided him on this mission: "it was the Aten himself, my father, who urged me to build this horizon city. . . . To my father the Aten I shall build shrines and temples in this city. A royal palace shall I raise here." The royal tomb, too, would be cut into the cliffs.

The pharaoh's horizon city took two years to build, and was populated with his court, priests, and followers of Aten.

A second daughter, Meketaten, joined the royal family in the move to a new city; and a third, Ankhesenpaaten, was expected soon. Hundreds of boats sailed 200 miles to deliver the new citizens to Akhenaten.

Profiteers, too, descended on the city - not looking for spiritual guidance, but eager for what gold and titles the king had to share. Akhenaten's single god principle - one divine source from which all life flowed - had not won over all who entered his city. The majority were "new men," raised up from humble beginnings. New opportunities and prestige were afforded to commoners, so that even noble-blooded people hid their inherited stature from the community. Women also seem to have benefitted from Akhenaten's social

revolution, finding more freedom and respect there.

The pharaoh's new ideas may have been ahead of his time – resisted as they were for veering from ancient traditions, eventually they would prove to be insightful contributions to our understanding of the world. His notion of the sun as a life source, though rooted in faith more than astronomy or biology, was confirmed by scientists centuries after his demise.

For Akhenaten, *maat* was more than truth and rightness; it meant being open and uncritical and not hiding the true nature of things. This influence is seen in artful depictions of everyday life in the new capital. Paintings and sculptors of the pharaoh and queen were more realistic – and unforgiving – showing them much less formally dressed and engaged, with imperfections (protruding stomachs, frail limbs and elongated heads) that would have been glossed over in royal depictions of the past.

The royal family had a life outside the palace – publicly displaying their affection for each other, kissing and embracing in plain view. Akhenaten took his daughters on chariot rides through the streets, often handing them the reins. He married two of his daughters.

The New Art of Akhenaten

A complete transformation of Egyptian art was taking place. A sense of movement presented itself in paintings and sculpture, as their subjects related and interacted with each other and their surroundings. This contrasted with the more timeless art style of the past, which showed scenes seemingly frozen in eternity. Highly valued, artists lived and worked in the best parts of town. Some of Egypt's most exquisite masterpieces, including a pair of famous portraits of Queen Nefertiti, originated in this time and place.

Akhenaten brought new life and natural resources to the desert, which grew lush and vibrant with gardens and parks. Estates of the most prosperous citizens ran along two roads parallel to the Nile, and featured their own impressive gardens, some featuring markers depicting the pharaoh and family basking in the Aten's rays. To speed construction, most houses and buildings were made of mud-brick, but a few of

the grander and more important homes and buildings were faced with stone.

Akhenaten's primary palace bordered the Nile and featured, just beyond a terrace garden, a view of the bustling commerce of boats and barges that traversed it daily, and new arrivals to the sacred city. From the Balcony of Royal Appearances, the royal family presented honors and gifts to their faithful servants and citizens.

Akhenaten's revolutionary reign shattered Egyptian's conventional reverence for the past. The capital he built and the thriving city that grew up around it - a city enlivened by artists and scholars, and devoted to the worship of a single god - was a stunning break with the past. (Akhetaten is now known as [Tell el-Amarna](#), and this era of sweeping change and reform is called the [Amarna Period](#).) Akhenaten, confident in his beliefs and determined to set Egypt on a new course, dismissed 2,000 years of art, custom, and religion. The chief beneficiary of this upheaval was, of course, Akhenaten himself. Aten's warm, golden rays favored the pharaoh; all others served him, perhaps hoping for glory by association.

There were two other palaces in Akhetaten - one to the south that housed the pharaoh and Nefertiti in summer, and counted among its luxuries a water garden and indoor aquarium; and another dedicated to the display of the city's natural wonders (mostly birds and animals).

The city proper was substantial, a stunning illustration of what a pharaoh's resources could achieve in a few short years. It included centers for government and education, but its heart was the massive, open-court temple of the Aten, where worshippers basked in full sunshine. A hymn written by the pharaoh was used in services. It began:

How manifold it is, what thou hast made!
They are hidden from the face (of man).
O sole god, like whom there is no other!
Thou didst create the world according to thy desire,
Whilst thou wert alone: All men, cattle, and wild beasts,
Whatever is on earth, going upon (its) feet,
And what is on high, flying with its wings.

This hymn, the greatest lasting example of ancient Egyptian poetry, contains similarities to Psalm 104 of the Bible, a connection historians have struggled to explain.

Akhenaten was one of the first influential monotheists - and because he was a pharaoh, among the first to have a significant following. Early Egyptologists assumed there must be a connection between Akhenaten's one-god religion and Judeo-Christian and Islamic beliefs, but no hard evidence of any such connection has been discovered. It has also been suggested that Akhenaten's religious zealotry was less a function of true faith than a political calculation designed to reassert the power of the pharaoh over the Amon priesthood. Perhaps it was a mixture of both - though it's hard to believe such a radical step wasn't based on genuine conviction.

Life in the city was nearly perfect for a while. The city was rich - there were no battles to finance, and a tax on property owners funded operation of the temples. This new way of life was prosperous, and enlivened and gave hope to the citizens, who, in their hearts, felt like a "chosen people."

Trouble in Paradise

This rare period of peace and joy did not last, however. Soon, the war and turmoil this peaceful pharaoh had endeavored so much to avoid was brewing at Egypt's borders and within his temples and palace.

Princess Meketaten, second-born to Akhenaten and Nefertiti, died too young, prompting doubts in the faithful as to the power and favor of their sun god. Meanwhile, a conspiracy plot against the pharaoh was hatched between the old nobility of Thebes and the priests of Amon, which, discovered by Akhenaten, probably goaded him further in his religious zealotry. Previously, Akhenaten had ordered images of Amon chiseled from the walls of his father's tomb; now he banned the worship of the old gods and decreed that their names be purged from every temple in Egypt. As shuttered ancient temples decayed, so did the towns, societies, economies, and cultures built up around them. The Egyptian way of life started to crumble.

Atenism was a complete reversal of the centuries-old Egyptian tradition of embracing an ever-changing multitude

of gods – whose numbers grew to accommodate new trends and fashions. It was also an oppressive and exclusive religion that tolerated no other gods and enhanced the pharaoh's divine stature. By putting one god before all others, Akhenaten had put himself above all previous pharaohs - as though he were the enlightened remedy to the primitive mythologies of the past.

This was not how things were done in ancient Egypt. Not surprisingly, the country was in turmoil. Akhenaten's religious revolution would be short-lived.

The pharaoh's pacifism and predilection for peace was rooted in the belief of his one god and a sense of equality: "You created the strange countries as well as the land of Egypt. You set every man in his place. . . . Men speak in many tongues, in body and complexion they are various, for you have distinguished between people and people."

Now embroiled in a war the pharaoh would prefer to turn a blind eye to, Egypt's allies in Palestine and Syria sought military assistance, but Akhenaten sent none. Some Egyptologists have suggested that Akhenaten was unaware of these pleas and that his ministers were reluctant to burden the king with requests they knew he was likely to reject. But they kept coming. The ruler of Byblos - a vital port on the Mediterranean in what is now Lebanon - wrote more than fifty letters imploring Akhenaten to send military aid or risk losing the city, which had long been under Egyptian control. Apparently, it would not have taken much to turn the tide, as the request was meager: "May it seem good to my lord," one letter went, "the Sun of the Lands, to give me twenty pairs of horses. Entreat the king to give you 300 men: thus we will be able to hold the city."

Meanwhile, as the Hittites expanded their empire, they came increasingly in conflict with the Mitanni. The defense and future of the empire was almost solely in the hands of a pair of commanders – a Lower Egypt general named [Horemheb](#) and [Ay](#), who led the king's cavalry and was likely a brother of Queen Tiye.

But Akhenaten's thoughts seem to have been elsewhere, and even if he had consulted with his generals, it would not have prevented his family from falling apart. Princess Meritaten -

one of Akhenaten's two daughters he had himself married – remarried a boy named [Smenkhkara](#), and the second daughter-wife, Ankhesenaten, was promised to Tutankhamen, who himself may have been the pharaoh's half-brother. Since the queen had produced half a dozen daughters but no sons, these alliances would play a crucial role in determining Egypt's next ruler. Then, for reasons probably both personal and political, the king and queen, who embodied the ideal of the Aten, fought and separated into two camps: Akhenaten with Smenkhkara at his side, and Nefertiti with Ankhesenaten and Tutankhamen in the northern palace.

Egypt's royal family unraveled. The last we know of Smenkhkara is that he returned to Thebes to try to broker a peace between the old order and the Amon priesthood. Akhenaten and Nefertiti vanish from records as well. Nothing is known of their deaths – only that the king and queen never were entombed, as planned, in their burial temple near Akhetaten. The former pharaoh was probably hastily buried in Thebes - DNA tests have confirmed poorly preserved remains discovered there are the son of Amenhotep III and the father of Tutankhamen, but there is no indication of how he died, or who may have killed him.

The new pharaoh was still a boy, and his name honored his father's new god: Tutankhamen. But the commander of the king's cavalry, Ay, now an old man, bore the crown's real power – and he twisted it in the direction of Thebes and the old religion.

The new pharaoh would rule for only nine years as Egypt's "Boy King," but under Ay, he renamed himself Tutankhamen and quickly turned his attention to reversing his father's religious revolution. The pharaoh's declaration, preserved in an inscription at Karnak, decried that Egypt's temples and shrines had "fallen into desolation and become ruins overgrown with weeds, their chapels as though they had never been. . . . The land was topsy-turvy, and the gods turned their backs on this land," and pledged to seek restitution for the gods and goddesses, chief among them Amon.

Tutankhamen ordered a return to the old rites and sacrifices, and undertook a re-deification program, building elaborate

tributes to the ancient gods.

But the Boy King's reign did not last; he died at eighteen, probably of an infected leg fracture, and with no heir to succeed him, Akhenaten's bloodline ended. His prominence in history is mostly due to the state in which his tomb was discovered – largely untouched by grave robbers, filled with riches and splendor that astounded the world.

The crown next went to Ay, whose cunning and cajoling had ruled Egypt from the wings for a decade. An old man, his time on the throne was brief. He was succeeded by his brother at arms, the tough professional soldier Horemheb - a commoner who ascended the throne through the ranks of the Egyptian army and ruled with an iron fist. He installed soldiers as priests; and weeded out corruption in his government – punishing those caught cheating at tax collections and breaking the rules by cutting off their noses.

Horemheb sought to rewrite history – wiping from the Egyptian landscape and memory all signs and influences of the heretic Akhenaten and his one god, the Aten. The new pharaoh acted as if Akhenaten had never ruled, claiming to be the immediate successor of Amenhotep III, invalidating Tutankhamen's reign, as well. The once-glorious city of Akhetaten faded into the desert.

Despite his background, Horemheb did not dispatch his armies to try to undo the empire's decay. After brokering a peace with the Hittites and striking fear in the Nubians, he marshaled his energies to stabilize Egypt's internal chaos and restore Amon as the chief god. Twenty-eight years after assuming the throne, somewhere around 1320 B.C., he died, and the eighteenth dynasty came to a close.



7

RESTORING OLD GLORY

With no heir to continue his legacy, Horemheb chose a successor among his soldiers, as his predecessor had in selecting him. The life of Paramesses had followed much the same trajectory as Horemheb's. An old and grizzled general by the time he became Horemheb's trusted advisor, Paramesses was born in a small province in the northeastern delta. Like his father, an army captain eventually promoted to command of all of Egypt's land forces, he rose through many official ranks to become Horemheb's vizier. As pharaoh, Paramesses dropped the first syllable of his name, to be crowned [Ramesses I](#). The nineteenth dynasty began in a new capital, [Pi-Ramesses](#), in the eastern delta where Qantir sits today. Thebes, however, remained a governmental center.

Another cultural shift was taking place in the Two Lands, evidenced by paintings and sculptures that were less refined, and the sturdier, more-flamboyant architecture of the nineteenth dynasty. Sprinkled with foreign vocabulary, the writings of pharaohs and commoners was assimilated. Put on edge by the social and political instability, people turned their attentions away from earthly pleasures and more toward the afterlife, which now dominated depictions in the tombs of Egypt's more elite citizens. Gone were the harvest and festival scenes popular in the eighteenth dynasty. A common image now portrayed Osiris, god of the afterlife, balancing a man's heart against the feather of *maat*, a representation of morality and justice.

Because of his advanced age, the rule of Ramesses I was brief and mostly insignificant. Perhaps his greatest contribution to Egypt was his son, [Seti I](#), who next assumed the throne and, during his reign, reunified the Two Lands and vanquished many of its enemies, making it – just once more – the ancient world's mightiest empire.

A powerful pharaoh – whose handsome features are clearly evident even today in his astonishingly well-preserved mummy and sculptures – Seti took a militaristic approach to his rule, envisioning himself primarily as a soldier, whose duty it was to return the empire to its former glory and stature abroad. He went right to work, his armies marching on neighboring Palestine and Syria while keeping the Libyans at bay in the west. The pharaoh's conquests are documented in carvings in [Hypostyle Hall](#) at Karnak, which show him barreling over his foes in a grand chariot. Another portrays

him with Syrian prisoners held submissively in the crook of each arm.

A temple Seti had constructed at Abydos stands as the most significant monument to his reign. The place where legend states Osiris' head was buried after being decapitated, Abydos had long been the destination of pilgrimages, and cemeteries were abundant there because of its connection with the god of the afterlife. Seti's choice of location may have won him favor with the priests of Osiris, and the inclusion of chapels worshipping Amon, Ra, and Ptah was an offering to Egypt's foremost gods – all disenfranchised by Akhenaten's proclamation of the Aten as the one true deity. Of course, Seti put himself in the company of the gods, erecting his own chapel alongside theirs, and commissioning art within that depicted the pharaoh (sometimes Seti; other times his father, Ramesses I) presenting the gods with gifts of flowers and food. The detail and delicate hues of these paintings is stunning: Exquisite jewels adorning flowing gowns and impressive headdresses; symbols of the gods featured abundantly; gluttonous, decadent dishes of cake, meat, duck and pomegranates.

There were privileges to being a priest or temple officiate under Seti's rule – specifically freedom from arrest and unjustified seizure of property by the government – but also harsh punishment for those who stepped outside the lines, including officials who abused their power and the same priests the royal charter was designed to protect. All those found in violation of the laws – as well as those who failed to prosecute the offenders – faced 100 public lashings, fines 100 times the worth of seized or stolen property, disfigurement (their ears cut off), and even enslavement.

These threats against the temples – and those who acted against them – signaled the start of a moral decay that followed Seti's reign in full force.

The pharaoh also concerned himself with the protection of those who mined and washed the gold intended for Egypt's temples – creating a well and place of rest for them along their long desert trek to the extraordinarily harsh mines near the Red Sea, to "keep them alive, so that they may bless my name in years to come, and that future generations may boast of my energy and of one who is compassionate and

regardful of travelers." Any theft of gold intended for the temple at Abydos was punishable by "all the great ones, the lords of the sacred land," he declared.

Seti's military campaigns in Asia, Libya, and Nubia were well recorded and show how ably he restored Egypt's reach and authority. He personally led his army as far as present-day Lebanon, along a road called "The Way of Horus" that stretched from the Nile delta across the northern edge of the Sinai into Gaza. As he traveled, he received tributes, refortified Egyptian strongholds, and beat back any resistance, repelling an invasion from Libya on Egypt's western border and quelling a rebellion in Nubia. Seti fought alongside his soldiers in some of these engagements, but also dispatched his forces to fight on their own as the situation dictated.

Seti's greatest victory came at Kadesh, a Hittite-held town in Syria that both Tutankhamen and Horemheb had failed to retake for Egypt. After triumphantly marching into the vanquished city, Seti put up a victory stela to commemorate the event. Eventually, the Hittites regained control of Kadesh - it was too far from Egypt to maintain a garrison there - but Seti I may have worked out a boundary agreement with the Hittites to end hostilities between the warring empires. It didn't last, however - a few years after Seti died, his successor tried to retake Kadesh, holding it briefly, but succumbing, in the end, to the Hittites.

For years, Egyptologists credited Seti with having restored "Egypt's lost empire." This view was bolstered by the so-called Armana Letters, the trove of dispatches that portrayed Egyptian holdings in Syria and Palestine as being in disarray during the reign of Akhenaten. More recently, scholars have realized that things were not that dire and that only the northernmost Egyptian empire disintegrated during Akhenaten's time. One reason for the revised history is that Seti left behind monuments and memorials boasting his martial successes and making it look as if he had accomplished more than he did.

A Builder, Not a Soldier

Manetho recorded Seti's reign as lasting for fifty-five years, but the best evidence suggests that he ruled for fewer than

fifteen years. Near the end, the pharaoh co-ruled Egypt with his son Ramesses II, saying "Crown him as king that I may see his beauty while I am alive." Ramesses II carried on his reign solo upon his father's death around 1300 B.C.

The new pharaoh was eager to pick up where his father had left off in the restoration of the empire. Some Egyptologists say Ramesses II saw himself as a second conqueror, like Thutmose III. He blazed a path to Asia carved out 200 years earlier, and employed a similar strategy. But this time, the campaign in Kadesh – not Megiddo, as was the case with Thutmose – was the pinnacle of his conquest, though the telling of it strayed from the truth to hide the pharaoh's ineptitude in the field.

Entirely in control of northern Mesopotamia, the Hittites were embroiled in a battle with Syria. Five years into his reign, Ramesses' military campaign into western Asia was divided into quadrants named for the chief gods. The king commanded the division of Amon, which, after marching 30 days or more, finally gazed upon Kadesh from a distant hill. The troops assessed the city's terrain and defenses – its perimeter of gates, walls, man-made moats and the Orontes River – but saw no trace of the Hittites.

The next morning, the pharaoh set out with his Amon division and advanced to the Orontes. There, men were brought to him who persuaded him that they were deserters from the army of the Hittite king, Muwatallis. They claimed the Hittite army was not at Kadesh but far to the north at Aleppo. Ramesses believed them, and he pushed on so fast that his four divisions became separated. With his own force, he set up a temporary camp northwest of the fortress. Most of the chariot horses were unharnessed and being watered when the pharaoh learned the alarming truth: The two men had been lying; Muwatallis' army was just on the other side of Kadesh. Ramesses had only enough time to blame his officers for the error before the frightened men of his Ra division, under attack by Muwatallis and taken entirely by surprise, swept past his camp in full flight. The vizier was sent to hurry the division of Ptah, which never arrived at the battlefield. According to Ramesses' account, he was abandoned by his entire army and drove his lone chariot against the 2,500 Hittite chariots: "They were three men to a pair of horses, whereas there was no captain with me, no charioteer, no

shield bearer” Bereft of his army, Ramesses reproached the king of the gods: “What ails thee, my father Amon? Is it a father’s part to ignore his son? Have I not made for thee many monuments and filled thy temples with my booty?” The god evidently relented, and the king claimed to have overcome the Hittites, trampling some under his chariot and driving many more into the Orontes River.

Although the pharaoh’s story was transparently fabricated, it was once considered a credible Egyptian victory. The Hittites also claimed a victory at Kadesh – in their version, Ramesses’ army fled south. Probably neither account is accurate – the truth lying somewhere in between.

After a period of fighting mostly to stalemate, the two powers signed a peace treaty, which set new boundaries and pledged a cooperative military response to attacks by outside enemies. A wedding cemented the alliance. King Ramesses made arrangements to marry a Hittite princess named Manefrure – beseeching, successfully, the gods to give her safe winter passage, and sending troops to escort her entourage into Egypt. The princess was immediately popular, and the marriage launched a period of tranquility and co-operation between the Hittites and Egypt.

The marriage, around 1257 B.C., brought to a close the pharaoh’s career as a warrior. His life from then on was quiet and pleasurable, marked by nine *Sed* celebrations.

Manefrure was just one of the pharaoh’s many wives and concubines, which included his mother and three daughters – but the most famous of his female consorts was his second great wife, Nefertari. All told, they bore him as many as 150 children.

The empire prospered during his sixty-three-year reign, which added to the landscape hundreds of spectacular tombs and monuments as constant reminders of his influence. Among all the pharaohs, Ramesses was the most fervent of temple builders, and can take credit for nearly half of the temples that survive today.

New Heights of Splendor

Of course, most of the buildings erected in Pi-Ramesses had

the pharaoh's handprint on them. He also had built a large temple at Memphis, which feature massive statues of Ramesses.

But his grandest contribution was Hypostyle Hall in the temple of Amon at Karnak. For a long time, Egyptologists believed that this immense undertaking was begun by either Horemheb or Amenhotep III, but newer interpretations of the evidence indicate that it was Seti I who commenced its construction. Long after Ramesses II, other pharaohs continued to add inscriptions.

A dozen enormous columns – seventy-eight feet high and thick enough to obscure a dozen adults from view – flanked the aisle leading into the elaborate hall dedicated to Hypostyle's commissioner, Ramesses II, and his father, Seti I. This immense structure - more than 52,000 square feet – was, in its day, roofed, and beams of light shone through slits in the façade. Today, it resembles a giant petrified forest, each enormous stone trunk bearing the deep inscriptions and images of ancient Egypt - like the generational rings of a grandfather tree marking off the year. For tourists, it is nearly as popular a destination as the pyramids. Although the hall emphasizes size over style, its enormous scale alone makes it a sight to behold.

Amenhotep III's temple at Luxor also featured a courtyard addition attributed to Ramesses. His burial temple in western Thebes became known as the [Ramesseum](#), and includes a fifty-seven-foot granite statue of him.

Of the multitude of Nubian temples he is credited with building – most crude and provincial – two were incredible, hewn into the sandstone cliffs at [Abu Simbel](#). Architects dug 210 feet into the cliff side to construct the Great Temple, and sculptors used thousands of tons of excavated rock to create eight enormous standing statues of Ramesses, in the likeness of Osiris; and four others in which he is seated, facing east toward the river. Deeper inside the temple, more carvings featured the pharaoh, as well as the gods Ra, Ptah, and Amon. Relief paintings portrayed the Asian campaigns. In the Great Hall of Pillars were stone portraits of Ramesses as Osiris, which also served as structural supports for the ceiling, adorned with a painting of flying vultures. The Little Temple of Nefertari paid tribute to the goddess Hathor, who, with the

pharaoh and queen, appears to step out from narrow gateways in the cliff.

The Nile has become Lake Nasser here, due to Egypt's Aswan Dam, and the lower levels of Ramesses' temple complex are now submerged. A moving of the guard occurred in 1968, when the towering statues once posted at the temple's entrance were relocated to the top of the cliff *from* which they were originally carved; so that the king and his queen continue to preside over the ancient kingdom buried beneath the blue waters.

Merenptah, Ramesses' thirteenth son, ascended to the throne around 1237 B.C. But despite the successes of his father, Merenptah faced a new threat instead of the prosperity and peace that marked the last years of Ramesses' reign. A western incursion of semi-barbaric tribes from the Balkan and Black seas spread to the Mediterranean. Egypt was being invaded.

A Libyan led a diverse group of enemy soldiers, including many who had settled along the North African coast, whom the Egyptians called Sea People – made up of early Greeks (Lycians, Sardinians, and Sicilians). The invaders traveled with family, cattle, and essential possessions - prepared to make a home in any Egyptian territory they conquered. These new foes had some success sacking western fortresses, but were defeated by the pharaoh's forces as they pushed further east into the delta. The empire was safe again.

The Last of the Great

Forceful migrations, more than foreign military campaigns, were the worry of pharaohs who followed – and altered the entire ethnic pattern of ancient Egypt. The Hittites' power crumbled, as Philistines and Canaanites poured into Palestine and Syria.

Ramesses III, second to rule during the twentieth dynasty, has been called Egypt's last great pharaoh – the last ruler of a 2,000-year monarchy. He wanted to be the kind of great warrior that Ramesses II claimed to be, but he barely managed to defend the delta. A new, furious onslaught had gained steam in the twentieth dynasty, which put the monarchy at odds once again with the Libyans and their

confederation of Sea People, including Philistines who had settled along the Palestinian coast.

The Sea People attacked Egypt both by sea and land. Once again, this was not simply a military adventure aimed at conquest, but a true migration, with women and children in tow, ready to settle down.

Ramesses III repelled this incursion, meeting them in one of history's first recorded sea battles, depicted in a mural in his burial temple at Thebes – his own Ramesseum. The pharaoh's boats intercepted enemy ships on the Nile, boarding some, as troops on shore volleyed arrows at the others. The mural showed at least one vessel capsized.

It was a glorious victory, and Ramesses' subjects may have felt that the might and majesty of the New Kingdom would continue forever. In fact, it was already fading. The Egyptian armies that threw back the invaders were nearly all made up of mercenaries. Asiatics and Libyans filled important posts in Ramesses' government, and the Egyptians themselves were becoming more conservative and inward-looking.

Ancient Egypt's strength had been tested by war – abroad and within its borders. The empire struggled to keep up with the advanced arsenal of new nations challenging its supremacy. But the monarchy was only as powerful as its pharaoh – a weak dynasty meant a weak empire. With the last of the great pharaohs, Egypt's downfall was assured.

Each pharaoh who followed Ramesses during the twentieth dynasty, which marked the end not only of the New Kingdom, but of the dynastic period itself, took his name with the Double Crown. But none lived up to the name Ramesses in deeds, and the Egyptians lost faith in their pharaoh, no longer believing him to be a deity. During the reign of the last of the Ramesses – Ramesses XI – the monarchy was again at odds with the powerful and wealthy priesthood of Amon. High Priest Herihor surpassed the pharaoh in might and influence, and in Karnak, portrayed himself as equal to the gods, wearing a Double Crown.

Over the subsequent centuries, continued internal conflict tore the country apart – again deeply dividing Upper and Lower Egypt. Another kingdom rose up defiantly in the far

south - led by Nubia's governor, known as the King's Son of Kush. Curiously, however, this African territory had become so accustomed to Egyptian rule that it continued its customs and religion. In 752 B.C., King Piye of Kush took the title of pharaoh, leading a revival for the old gods and again invoking the virtues of *maat*.

The Nubian pharaohs restored order, and ushered in another short-lived period of prosperity. Twice, they fended off Assyrian invasions. But in 525 B.C., Persians usurped control and ruled Egypt off and on for nearly 200 years.

When Alexander the Great arrived in Egypt on his long string of conquests, the Persians handed over the land without a fight and the Egyptians hailed him as a liberator. Alexander was pronounced a son of Amon and "Master of the Universe," and proceeded to found the city of Alexandria in the delta. Alexander left the country after only a year, but his general Ptolemy became the new ruler, first in the line of Ptolemaic kings.

Like the Nubian pharaohs before them, the Ptolemies adopted much of the Egyptian culture, even mimicking pharaohs. They portrayed themselves on monuments in Egyptian costume and took to marrying their sisters. Egyptian tradition and style - a mixture of new and old - continued to manifest in art.

The "Whore Queen" Rules

The Ptolemies ruled Egypt for ten generations, but it's the last of them who is best remembered: Cleopatra, "the whore queen," as the Roman Propertius called her. In truth, she was a gifted and powerful woman libeled by history as a mere temptress and wanton. While Cleopatra did, indeed, seduce both Julius Caesar and his protégé Marc Antony, she did so in a successful bid to keep her throne and preserve Egypt from total subservience to Rome. Her twenty-one-year reign was one of peace and prosperity.

We don't know what Cleopatra looked like, but she was not Elizabeth Taylor. The profile on her coins, which she surely approved, shows an unremarkable young woman with a largish nose and prominent chin. But the outline of her story follows the Hollywood script.

Inheriting the throne at eighteen with her ten-year-old brother, she was soon embroiled in a civil war with him. On the brink of losing, she had herself smuggled (rolled up in a rug, one legend has it) into her own palace, which the Roman Caesar had commandeered as his quarters on a mission to quell the turmoil in Egypt. She became his lover, and while pregnant with his son, stayed at his side while he defeated her brother's army and restored her to the throne, making Egypt a tributary to Rome. Several years later, with Caesar dead and Marc Antony opposing Octavian in what became a civil war in Rome, Cleopatra sided with Antony (she bore him three children over eleven years). Octavian declared war on Egypt in 31 B.C., and defeated Antony at the battle of Actium. As Octavian prepared to take Cleopatra back to Rome as a prisoner, she barricaded herself in a seaside mausoleum and committed suicide – probably not by holding an asp to her bosom, as legend has it, but by taking poison. She was thirty-nine years old.

By all accounts, Cleopatra was a remarkable woman – intelligent, charismatic and eloquent, resourceful and daring, fluent in nine languages, and a master of politics, diplomacy, and governance. If her historic image has been reduced to her sex life, that's no accident; it often happens to powerful women, as it suits the purpose of the winners who write history. As writer Stacy Schiff neatly put it, Octavian "restored the natural order of things: Men ruled women, and Rome ruled the world."

Cleopatra was the last of the pharaohs. After her death, Egypt effectively became a Roman province. But even then, the power of Egyptian culture continued to overwhelm foreign conquerors. Temples constructed during Roman rule in the first and second centuries A.D., are nearly indistinguishable from Egyptian style – showing familiar symbology and depictions of deities and pharaohs.

After the Roman Empire dissolved in the seventh century A.D., Egypt came under Arab rule; 500 years later, the [Mamelukes](#), an Egyptian military caste originally made up of slaves from Turkey, took over the country and presided for three centuries of peace and prosperity. In 1517, the country became part of the Turkish Ottoman Empire; and in 1798, Napoleon's troops were repelled by the Turks in alliance with a British force.



8

RECLAIMING THE PAST

Napoleon's failed venture proved to be the beginning of Egyptology. Breaking the code of the Rosetta Stone was a breakthrough in uncovering the secrets of ancient Egypt, and a major accomplishment for the French scholars behind it. But the encroaching world's increasing fascination with Egypt in the nineteenth century was tainted by greed, and left much of what remained of the culture in strewn ruins. Europe's museums looked to make a reputation on their collections of Egyptian antiquities, and were ruthless in acquiring them. Scholarly study of the ancient monuments and inscriptions occurred, but more often than not, profiteers got there first. Just as Champollion's expedition reached the First Cataract on a hunt for artifacts, and German scholar [Karl Richard Lepsius](#) made it to Khartoum, ancient ruins were being plundered by agents of European governments.

An intimidating nearly seven-foot Italian dispatched by the British consul, [Giovanni Belzoni](#), was about as ruthless as collectors came. Before he ended up in Egypt, he was a circus performer with his equally imposing English wife. He was a pirate of sorts, much like his rivals. Once, on the island of Philae, he tried to abscond with an obelisk while in the gun sights of rival agents from France, who took their claim to the prize seriously.

The Italian described an encounter with mummified remains in an Egyptian tomb, writing, "When my weight bore on the [mummy] of an Egyptian, it crushed like a band box. I sank altogether among the broken mummies with a crash of bones, rags, and wooden cases . . . I could not avoid being covered with legs, arms, and heads rolling from above."

Yet, the artifacts he acquired and discoveries he made were significant – including a colossal bust of Ramesses II, delivered in impeccable condition to London's British Museum. The first European to enter the temples of Abu Simbel, Belzoni also uncovered Seti I's tomb in the Valley of the Kings.

Recognizing the losses incurred by zealous, destructive expeditions, scholars attempted to set standards of conduct for archaeologists in Egypt. In 1850, Frenchman Auguste Mariette convinced Egypt's viceroy to establish a service of antiquities, which, under his leadership, put controls on excavation, outlawed tomb plundering, and laid the

foundation for a national museum in Cairo. Strides were made, but it was still not enough. Plundering continued, albeit less openly. Mariette published the results of his discoveries, but many others passed undocumented.

Thirty years later in England, Sir [William Flinders Petrie](#) set a new standard for scientific research, insisting exact records be kept of even the most insignificant discoveries. He also started a process of dating sites using the pottery found there.

American explorers and archaeologists arrived on the scene in the 1890s – standouts among them were [George Andrew Reisner](#) and [James Henry Breasted](#), who with others established the Oriental Institute in Chicago and Luxor. Breasted's studies of Egyptian culture focused on their faith and intellect.

Undoubtedly, the most valuable findings archaeologists and scholars uncovered were the unspectacular scraps that enabled them to reconstruct the past. However, everyone delights in the rich and dramatic discoveries that punctuate the course of archaeological exploration with bursts of excitement; without them, archaeology might seem a dull occupation to all except the experts. Egypt, partly because of its past wealth, but more because of a climate so dry that even the most perishable items may be preserved, has had an exceptionally large share of such spectacular discoveries, with the majority dating from the time of the New Kingdom.

In the 1870s, the flood of tokens such as scarabs and canopic jars into a black market of Egyptian antiquities led some to believe that tombs had been discovered secretly. In 1881, [Gaston Maspero](#), who took charge of the antiquities service from Mariette, suspected a villager of plundering hidden tombs near where he lived in the Valley of the Kings. The villager was brought to trial, during which his character was held up by friends and neighbors, and he was released. But, later that year, a quarrel among siblings led one brother to make an admission: As suspected, the villager had come across a tomb, which held not one but dozens of mummies.

One of Maspero's men, [Emile Brugsch](#), hastily put together an expedition to investigate the claim. He descended a deep shaft in the stone cliff and, by candlelight, crawled along a

long tunnel to a confined space, littered with alabaster and bronze, and crowded with the remains of some of ancient Egypt's most-revered leaders. Inscriptions identified many of them, including Ahmose, Thutmose III, Seti I, and Ramesses II.

Maspero marveled at the find, later writing: "Monsieur Emile Brugsch, coming so suddenly into such an assemblage, thought that he must be in a dream, and like him, I still wonder if I am not dreaming when I see and touch what were the bodies of so many famous personages of whom we never expected to know more than the name."

Clues in the wrappings of the royal mummies - amassed in such an unfitting space and manner - suggest that sometime after 1100 B.C., they were moved from their more illustrious mortuary chambers to protect them from an influx of grave robbers during the twentieth dynasty. A priest of Thebes is believed to have taken the initiative, gathering as many intact mummies as he could, identifying some and wrapping them in fresh linen, before hiding them in the tomb of a little-known queen. He collected some of their temple furnishings, crammed into the small space with their corpses - where they remained undisturbed until pillagers again struck 3,000 years later.

A Glimmer of Gold

In 1903, a Rhode Island millionaire named Theodore Davis and his archaeologists - including a former apprentice to the masterful Flinders Petrie - found the tomb of Thutmose IV, plundered but still containing some of the grave articles, including a chariot. Later, they located the looted tombs of Hatshepsut and Horemheb.

In 1905, Davis found the entrance to a tomb in a space between the tombs of Ramesses III and Ramesses XI. The doorway was cut in solid rock and was blocked by mud and stones. There was a small hole in the top, however, and a little Egyptian boy was lowered into the tomb on the end of an unwound turban. At the entrance, he picked up a large stone scarab, a chariot yoke, and a carved staff. All had been covered with gold foil; it appeared that robbers brought them from the tomb believing them to be solid gold, then discarded them when they realized their mistake.

Clearing the stone obstructions, Davis led a team that included Maspero by candlelight down a steep passage and steps to another blocked entryway. The flicker of their candles revealed, through a small gap atop the door, a glimmer of gold. The veteran explorers suddenly were unexpectedly nimble, scrambling over stones into the muggy chamber, where they encountered two mummies – a male and female, their gilded coffins breached and faces unwrapped by plunderers searching for jewels. An inscription on the man's funeral sled identified him as Yuya, which made his female companion Tuya – the parents of Queen Tiye. The thrill of the discovery nearly led to tragedy – as candles held close to read the hieroglyphs might have sparked a suffocating blaze if not for the quick reflexes of Maspero. The close call delayed further study of their discovery until electric cables could be brought in.

Though commoners, their familial tie to King Amenhotep III's great wife had earned Yuya and Tuya an eternal place in the royal valley. Significant not just because of their identities, much was learned from the interment itself – at the time, the most-complete found in the Valley of the Kings.

Grave robbers had left behind many treasures – the glimmer glimpsed from the door was indeed gold. A plate of gold covered an incision through which embalmers removed Tuya's heart to be preserved in a container. In the plunderers' haste, they had also let slip into obscurity in the coffin a golden necklace of Tuya's.

Furniture, too, remained, including an intricately inlaid chair, the last item to be carted out by the archaeologists. In a comical moment, seventy-nine-year-old Empress Eugenie, widow of Napoleon III, forced her way into the burial chamber, rebuffing efforts to guide her down the incline. When apologies were made that there was nowhere for her to sit and rest, she plopped down on the priceless chair, saying, "This one will do very well." Its sturdiness was fortunate – as it was undamaged.

This discovery sparked a determination in Davis to find the tomb of Queen Tiye, and in 1907, he thought he had done so. Behind another barricaded doorway in the Valley of the Kings, a small chamber held an obliterated coffin and a clue to its inhabitant: The image of a queen worshiping the Aten, and a

splintered shrine inscribed as a gift from Tiye to her son, Akhenaten.

The mummy, a male, entombed here was clearly not Tiye, but many believe it to be the religious heretic King Akhenaten. Others insist the remains are of a man much too young to be Akhenaten, and so theorize that it is Smenkhkara, Akhenaten's son-in-law and successor. Clues indicate the coffin – found with a bronze serpent, indicating royalty – was originally crafted for a queen or princess, but was later adapted for a pharaoh. Efforts by Horemheb to strike his name and record from history may explain the lack of identification on gold bands encircling the mummy. But Akhenaten's name does appear on bricks inside the tomb, meant to ward off evil spirits. DNA tests have established that the mummy was closely related to Tutankhamen, but that could be said of both Akhenaten and Smenkhkara. The mystery of this makeshift memorial seems to reflect the tragic drama swirling about the disgraced pharaoh and his family.

The Glory of Nefertiti

Meanwhile, that same year, excavation of his great, short-lived city of Akhetaten promised to shed more light on Akhenaten's reign. Archaeologists from Germany began to unearth, from beneath a flat-topped mound, the city east of the Nile. They found many boundary stones intact and upright, their inscriptions still distinguishable. Cut into the cliffs, they discovered tombs for the king and queen, and the city's elite – and within, portraits of daily life.

Twenty years earlier, clay tablets dug up by a peasant woman turned out to be letters between Akhenaten and his father, Amenhotep III, which have become known as the Amarna Letters. Chiseled in the cuneiform style of Mesopotamia, mostly in Akkadian dialect, they communicated personal affairs of the royals, including detailed plans for a wedding – such as a sort of gift registry, listing everything from horses and chariots to embroidered sandals. Among the correspondence also were demands from Asian kings for more gold, allies' pleas for military assistance (which went largely ignored), and accounts and reflections from visits to territories in southwest Asia. cursory investigation of the site that yielded the tablets also unearthed paintings that

probably once hung in the king's harem.

No one explored the true depths of Akhetaten, though, until the German excavation of 1907. Entirely constructed during the New Kingdom, and abandoned shortly thereafter, the city offered a unique perspective on that specific era's style and architecture. Interrupted by World War I, the excavation of Akhetaten was picked up later by the British, and eventually revealed a fairly complete picture of life in the capital, from its spectacular palaces to its streets – its immensely wealthy citizens to the workmen who toiled making the tombs and lived in small, uniform homes.

Among the crumbled walls of Akhenaten's summer palace, another clue to the Egyptians' intellect was found. Red markings on the ground, which may have seemed innocuous to any other explorer, were a revelation to Englishman Charles Woolley, who recognized in them an ingenious architectural plan: "When the cement foundation was dry, the builders had worked out on it the architect's plan: a cord dipped in red paint had been stretched taut along the line of each proposed wall, the middle of it lifted and allowed to come slap down on the cement, with the result that a red streak was left as straight as if it had been ruled; between two such lines the builder had laid his wall stones."

The studios of Akhetaten's artists yielded more substantial impressions of the capital's inhabitants – right down to their literal handprints, collected hastily in plaster, perhaps as a study, by one sculptor. Of course, sculptures, portraits and sketches of the pharaoh abounded.

But a German team led by [Ludwig Borchardt](#) claimed the most spectacular works of art: A pair of limestone busts capturing the exquisiteness of Queen Nefertiti. The first, though unfinished, conveys a passion and emotion beyond that of the second, most-famous one – a masterpiece painted and inlaid, showing the queen's intense beauty in intricate detail (replicas of it are still sold throughout the world).

Writing of his discovery, Borchardt could scarcely contain his excitement. "Suddenly we had in our hands the most alive Egyptian artwork," Borchardt wrote in his diary. "You cannot describe it with words. You must see it."

Records from the German excavation suggest that Borchardt was determined to return the bust to Germany. In a meeting with Egyptian officials a few weeks after the discovery, he reportedly downplayed the significance of the bust, displaying a poorly made photograph of it to an inspector and claiming it was carved from gypsum to further confuse the issue - charges he would later deny. German officials insist the bust was acquired fairly. It has been kept in various German museums ever since - except during World War II, when it was shuttled among various vaults and bunkers for safekeeping. The bust finally wound up in a salt mine, where it was rediscovered by the United States Army and eventually returned to German authorities.

There's reason to believe Borchardt felt he'd gotten away with something. When the Berlin Museum displayed artifacts from the Amarna excavations in 1913 and 1914, Borchardt insisted that the Nefertiti bust not be included in the exhibit. The same thing happened again a few years later. The bust remained in hiding until 1923, when it was finally displayed in the Egyptian Museum of Berlin. The public seized on the bust as an incomparable example of feminine beauty. Along with the death mask of Tutankhamen and the Great Pyramid at Giza, the bust is regarded as one of ancient Egypt's most iconic artifacts. It is also the prize in a fierce struggle between Germany and Egypt, which is demanding its return.

The Nefertiti bust is more consistent with traditional Egyptian art than the eccentric styles that emerged during Akhenaten's rule in his strange, free-thinking, one-god-worshipping capital city. It is nineteen inches tall and weighs forty-four pounds. Nefertiti wears a blue crown with a gold ribbon. She leans forward gracefully on her long neck, gazing into eternity. No one has determined exactly what the bust was for or where it was destined to go - it was found in the artist's studio, apparently undelivered. One theory is that it may have been made as a model for other portrayals of the queen.

“Wonderful Things”

As many treasures as Akhenaten's lost city gave the world, their discovery pales in comparison to the riches of Tutankhamen's tomb.

Upon retirement, Davis felt the greatest discoveries in ancient

Egypt were behind him, writing, "I fear the Valley of the Kings is now exhausted."

But his archaeological colleagues still pined for one more lost royal: Tutankhamen, Akhenaten's second son-in-law, and the "Boy King," entombed and hidden since his death in 1352 B.C. Many found artifacts had the name Tutankhamen, but Davis held the belief that his tomb had been lost to history forever – obliterated by time and usurpers.

In 1922, Englishman [Howard Carter](#), in an excavation in the Valley of the Kings funded by the [Earl of Carnarvon](#), proved otherwise. Tutankhamen's was the tomb he sought most fervently; he didn't know it yet, but he was on the threshold of his greatest discovery.

Another apprentice of Petrie, Carter was about to pack up and move on when, on November 4, his men stumbled on a step beneath rubble near the tomb of [Ramesses VI](#). The step became stairs, descending into the earth. At the bottom was a sealed entrance.

The eager Carter cabled his patron, the Earl, and painstakingly awaited his arrival two weeks later.

Finally able to explore further, Carter's men found Tutankhamen's name inscribed on seals at the base of the door. Behind it, rubble littered a sloping hall, evidence of grave robbers – raising doubts about what might be left intact deeper into the tomb, where the team encountered a second sealed doorway.

Finally on November 26 - "the day of days, the most wonderful that I have ever lived through," Carter wrote - they breached the temple. Shining a light into a tiny gap they had made in the entryway, Carter glimpsed "strange animals, statues, and gold - everywhere the glint of gold."

"Can you see anything?" the Earl asked. "Yes, wonderful things," Carter replied.

Something must have scurried the plunderers before they were able to take more than a few jewels, because the tomb itself was still almost completely intact.

Despite Tutankhamen's brief, unremarkable reign and young

age at the time of his death, his tomb was resplendent with elaborate furnishings and rich in religious symbolism. It was more than any archaeologist would have imagined, even for the greatest pharaohs.

Artifacts from the tomb of Tutankhamen have been displayed to eager viewers around the world. The most famous exhibition, *The Treasures of Tutankhamen*, opened at the British Museum in 1972. Over the next seven years, it traveled to many countries, including Canada, Japan, Russia, and the United States. The American stop, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, drew more than 8 million people - a number befitting a king.

There's a lot still to be learned about ancient Egypt. Almost daily archeologists are piecing together new finds and experiencing small epiphanies about old ones. No one knows how many still-unexplored tombs are to be found in the Valley of the Kings, and even though the old tomb-robbers were good at their trade, there is always hope that another like Tut's will turn up.

There are even big surprises to be found in places long ago explored. In 1995, archeologist [Kent R. Weeks](#), clearing out an all-but-forgotten tomb found by [James Burton](#) back in 1825, stumbled on what has been called the biggest discovery in the Valley of the Kings since Tutankhamen's tomb. As Weeks wrote in *National Geographic*, Burton described a large pillared hall in the tomb, filled with rubble washed in by ancient floods. In clearing it out, Weeks and his crew found a doorway in the rear wall, which they assumed led to a small chamber. Crawling in over the rubble, they found a gap.

"I shone my flashlight into the gap; there was nothing but blackness," Weeks wrote. "Strange, I thought. The light should reflect off a wall. Crawling forward, we found that the corridor, which was about nine feet wide, continued a hundred feet into the hillside. There was one door on the left, another on the right, then two more, then four. We counted doors as we crawled forward: ten, twelve, sixteen, eighteen. Other tomb corridors in the Valley of the Kings have at most one or two doorways cut into their walls. I had never seen a corridor like this one in any Egyptian tomb."

The corridor ended at a T, with a statue of Osiris, god of the afterlife, guarding the intersection. To the left and right were more corridors, heading deeper into the bedrock, with even more doors cut into their walls. Weeks and his two companions crawled back to the pillared chamber, stunned at the magnitude of the find; his rough estimate was that the tomb might contain sixty-five burial chambers. Inscriptions in the first two indicated that they had been dug for some of Ramesses II's seventy sons. As he crawled out of the tomb, sweaty and exultant, Weeks told himself, "I know how we're going to be spending the next twenty years."

Sixty-five chambers turned out to be an underestimation. At last count, 130 chambers had been found in the tomb, and present thinking is that it was constructed for all of Ramesses II's children, male and female, who didn't have their own separate tombs. So far only ten of the rooms have been fully explored. For the delicate work of excavating and picking through the debris, just two workmen at a time may be used – but depending on how deep in the tomb they are, as many as thirty workers may form a bucket brigade to take the dirt and rock to the surface. Vandalism by tomb robbers and damage from three thousand years of flooding have left the tomb in bad shape, but Weeks and his people have found thousands of objects, including many *shabtis* – small figures in faience or alabaster representing servants who will feed and cosset the dead in the afterlife. There are also spectacular wall paintings and carvings, including some showing Ramesses presenting one or more of his sons to the gods. At the moment, there's no estimate for finishing the job.

Everlasting life for Egypt's pharaohs was the sustaining principle of Egyptian civilization. In an ancient religious text, a deceased king asks the creator-god, "O Aton, what is my duration of life?" The deity replies, "Thou art destined for millions of millions of years, a lifetime of millions." One common designation for tomb meant "house of eternity," and for "a lifetime of millions" the pharaohs built tombs to last forever.

But there's another way to look at it. An old Egyptian saying holds that "to speak the name of the dead is to make him live again." As long as future generations remain fascinated by the grandeur of ancient Egypt, people will keep talking about

the pharaohs, and they will live on. That may not last for eternity, but it is certain to be a very long time.



GALLERY



Giant columns in the temple of Luxor at night



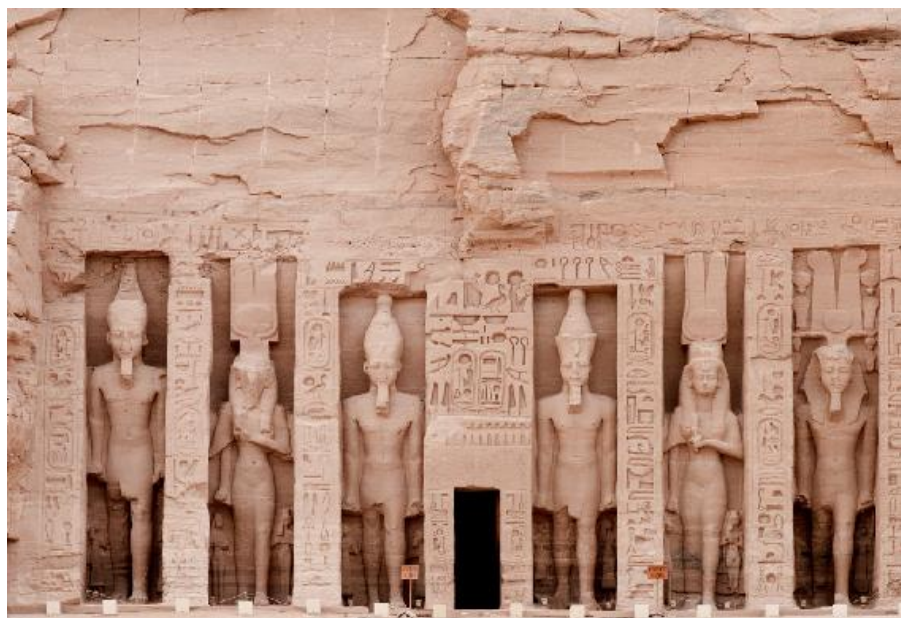
Giza pyramids



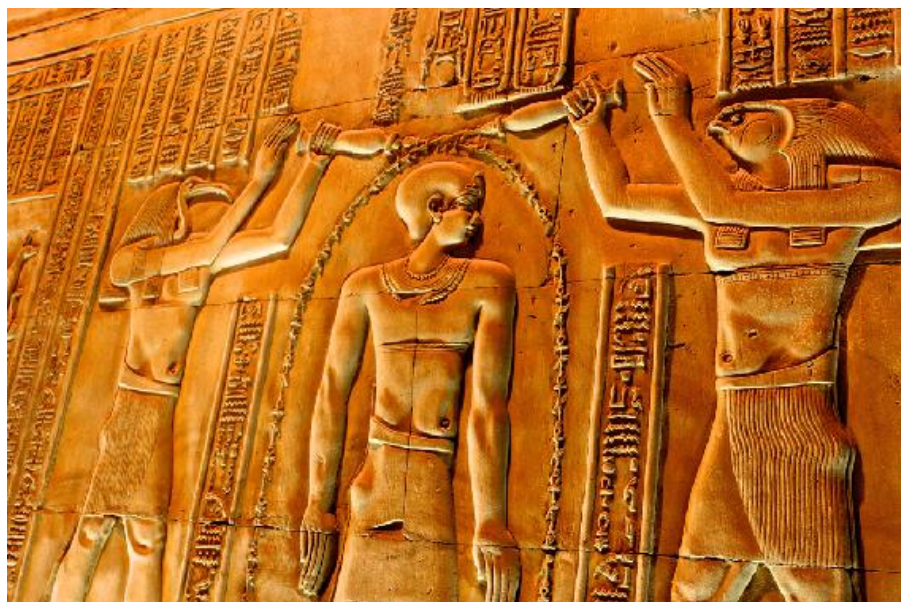
Full profile of Giza's Great Sphinx



Dendera temple ruins



The Temple of Hathor, built between 1274 and 1244 B.C.



Hieroglyphs in a Luxor temple



Sunrise on the Nile



Great Hypostyle Hall and clouds at the Temples of Karnak



Statues outside a Karnak temple



Mortuary Temple of Hatshepsut



Aerial view over the West Bank of Luxor showing the Mortuary Temple of Hatshepsut and a fragment of the Valley of the Kings



Statues of King Tutankhamen and Queen Nefertiti at Luxor.



Tutankhamen's funerary mask



Tutankhamen's funerary casket



Statue of Ramesses II found at Memphis, Egypt



Ruins of an ancient Egyptian town



The Egyptian Museum in Cairo



A pharaoh's mummy



One of the sphinxes at Cleopatra's Needle along Victoria Embankment in London



Pyramids as seen from the city of Cairo



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Published by New Word City, Inc., 2014
www.NewWordCity.com

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ISBN 978-1-61230-761-9